

Path of the Rainbow by DragonBoy7

Series: [Path of the Rainbow \[1\]](#)

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: M/M

Language: English

Characters: Dustin Henderson, Eleven | Jane Hopper, Jennifer Hayes, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Original Female Character(s), Original Male Character(s), Robin Buckley, Troy Walsh (Stranger Things), Will Byers

Relationships: Dustin Henderson & Mike Wheeler, Jonathan Byers & Joyce Byers & Will Byers, Lucas Sinclair & Mike Wheeler, Maxine "Max" Mayfield & Mike Wheeler, Will Byers & Eleven | Jane & Dustin Henderson & Maxine Mayfield & Lucas Sinclair & Mike Wheeler, Will Byers & Eleven | Jane Hopper, Will Byers & Jennifer Hayes, Will Byers & Mike Wheeler, Will Byers & Troy Walsh, Will Byers/Mike Wheeler

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Summary:

Will Byers has never lived an easy life, not by any stretch of the imagination. He's survived bullies, brutes, interdimensional beasts, and his father. But something deep within terrifies him: a set of forbidden feelings.

Mike Wheeler has always been able to conquer anything, be it school, relationships, or the personification of evil itself. But one monster terrifies him more than anything - the monster in his closet.

When a new English teacher - a very gay one - arrives in Hawkins,

both boys are forced to confront the reality of who they are. It's a steep path to walk, a path filled with joy, sorrow, and grief, but they have each other. Perhaps that's all they need.

The year is 1985, and the AIDS epidemic is ravaging America. And of course, who could forget the spectres that inhabit the dark? The shadow of something terrifying lurks beneath the surface... and it wants revenge.

(A/N: I'm temporarily putting this on hold until S4 of the show releases. There's two reasons: I've been low on motivation to write ST content, and I've also found a plot hole that forces me to rework the last 10 or so chapters of the fic. So, I'll definitely return to this, but in late 2021/start of 2022. Sorry!)

1. The Last Day of Summer

Author's Note:

Note: In this work, the events of Season 3 are not officially canon. However, many of its plot elements have been incorporated into the story at some point. Namely, Robin is here because she's awesome.

PART ONE

August 18, 1985

It begins, like many other things do, with AIDS.

So far, it's a normal morning for Will. He slowly arises to the sounds of pots clanking and the distinct thumps of his mother pacing about far too quickly. He scratches at his chest, more out of habit than ritual, flinching slightly as his fingers trace over the burnt patches. He pulls out his pills from their hiding place in his bedside drawer - not that anyone is looking - and mirthlessly swallows them with a half empty glass of water. So far, so good.

It's when he enters the kitchen that he senses something distinctly *wrong*. Not a supernatural type of wrong, or a family argument type of wrong, but something else. There's a subtle undercurrent of tension; Jonathan's shoulders are hunched as he aggressively wipes grease off a plate, and his mother can't keep her eyes in any location for more than a second. Will sighs to himself, wondering if he'll be enjoy his final day of summer in peace.

“Mom? Jonathan? Is something wrong?” he asks.

“Oh, sweetie, you’re awake. Everything’s fine. Don’t worry. There was just some news on the radio about AIDS cases in a nearby city,” Joyce says.

“Yeah, mom’s concerned for no reason. It’s nothing unusual. It already spread to Indiana last year in Kokomo,” Jonathan adds. “Was bound to show up around here sometime.”

If she’s concerned for no reason, then why are you frightened too? Will wants to ask, but Jonathan’s weary expression suggests otherwise. Will nods along silently and pulls out leftovers from yesterday’s take-out night, slowly eating noodles while he observes his mother and brother. Honestly, they’re right to feel scared. The disease has haunted his own dreams as of late, and while it’s not as visceral and *alive* as his Mind Flayer dreams, he’s woken up crying in a damp sweat enough times to be bothered.

Somehow, the silence is more uncomfortable than the conversation. Jonathan must have noticed, since Will soon hears the jingles and whistles of Hawkins News. Minutes later, he hears the newscaster’s voice - well, his shrieks - from the radio:

“The homosexual plague has been on the rise recently, with instances of GRID, or Gay-Related Immune Deficiency, occurring in three neighbouring towns. Since its appearance in Kokomo in 1985, the plague has continued to infect homosexuals and normal folk across the state. Religious leaders have likened the disease to the bite of a terrible insect, calling it *parasitic* and *venomous*. Scientific data reveals that it destroys one’s insides, but the details are not fully known. Parents should keep a close eye on their children and be alert

of any potential deviants on the streets. If you fear that someone you know may be a sodomite, alert the local church immediately. We cannot allow the purity of our Hawkins to be compromised like the rest of America. Stay tuned for further information from health officials-”

Jonathan turns the radio off and sheepishly looks to Will. “Sorry.”

Parasitic. Venomous. “It’s fine.”

Will isn’t quite sure why his brother is apologizing. Joyce also looks frazzled, and he feels slightly unnerved by the two pairs of eyes staring him down. Not that he’ll say anything, of course. He shifts slightly in his chair and notices that neither of them react to the pitchy creaking noise it makes.

“So, I was gonna visit Mike and the others today,” Will says, hoping the distraction will ease his family’s rigid stares. It doesn’t.

“That’s great, dear.” A pause. “What are you doing?”

“Uh, we’ll go around town probably. But we’ll all be together,” he adds when he sees Joyce’s expression falter. “Don’t worry, Mom. Mike will be there with me the whole time. Promise.”

It does appear to pacify her somewhat, judging from her loud sigh-exhale. Joyce turns to finish gathering her belongings for her weekend shift, while Jonathan finishes the silverware. He motions to

Will to hand him his plates, and Will immediately obliges, a bit too eager to get out of his chair. *Parasitic. Venomous.*

Nobody says anything after that. Will quickly pulls on a long-sleeved shirt and jeans, before practically rushing out the door. *Forget about all that. Forget about the gay disease. Just enjoy your last day of summer with Mike and the others. You can do that much, Will.* He repeats the last sentence like a mantra, repeatedly reminding himself that he can be happy so that he doesn't forget it.

Unsurprisingly, he's the last to arrive at the Wheeler abode. He finds Mike sitting on the front steps, engaged in deep conversation with Eleven about god knows what. Both Mike and El are dear to him, but he always feels strangely disturbed when he sees them speaking alone. Those little glances have so much intensity. It's like they inhabit their own private universe, and Will is a lost observer in outer space without a helmet on; the feeling of guilt builds up, choking him, until he can't breathe and has to look away. He can never point out what that damn feeling is, because it never pops up when Mike and Lucas talk, or when El and Max do.

Actually, that's a lie. He knows exactly what it is. But admitting it is like accepting it. Mike is clearly best friends with El now, and it shouldn't hurt, but it does. That spot belongs to *him* - it's been his property, his *birthright*, since they were five. Who the hell just snatches it away like that? Mike's ex-girlfriend does, apparently.

"Will! What took you so long?" It's Max.

"S-sorry, just... family things."

“Oh. Ok. Well, you’re here now, I guess. Lucas! Dustin! Stop arm-wrestling and get going. You too, lovebirds,” she says, nudging El surprisingly gently.

“Will!” Mike’s eyes light up slightly, and Will feels himself warm up a bit. “When did you get here?” *Oh.*

“Just a moment ago. Wasn’t in the mood to watch the whole sexual tension thing again,” he says, moving his arms Mike and El’s general direction. It does not look as nonchalant as intended.

Mike gives him a tired look and curls his lips into a frown. “For the love of... guys, we broke up weeks ago. Find something else to bother me about.”

“Yeah, let’s just get going,” Dustin says. “It’s already past noon and there’s gonna be a huge crowd at the arcade.”

With that, the Party hop on their bikes and head off. Will tries to pedal a bit faster at first and quickly leads the pack. Then, as the others catch up, he slowly maneuvers himself in between Mike and El. Luckily, neither of them seem bothered by it. Maybe he can enter their universe after all.

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The arcade trip goes as expected, not that Will’s complaining. The Party is careful to keep an eye on El; technically, Hopper *still* keeps

her at home, but he's been more lenient with her as of late. He's still strict as ever with the rest of them, however. His mother always insists that he's a "softie at heart," but Will can never quite see past the angry Papa Bear act.

It's surprisingly refreshing to see Mike get his ass kicked at Dig Dug *again* by Max. Will has a (secret) running list of Mike's excuses that accompany each loss, and somehow they manage to get increasingly elaborate. The list occupies an entire section of his favourite sketchbook. This time, the excuse has something to do with the air temperature and Mike's hands 'vibrating and slipping' due to sweat. When Will asks Lucas about the scientific accuracy of that, the boy just laughs.

El also enjoys herself a lot, judging by her wild giggles every time she gets a high score on Pac-Man. Hopper gave her a *generous* allowance for today, and Will can't help but be a little jealous because he only has a few coins saved up. Mike notices, of course, and offers like he always does, but Will gently refuses every time. So instead, Will decides to backseat drive alongside Dustin while El gets frustrated at Clyde's wild behaviour. It's surprisingly cathartic.

Dusk falls far too soon, and El has to return for her curfew. Will and Mike try to cajole her into playing 'just one more round,' but she's persistent, probably because her last arcade soiree ended in an angry Police Chief. Max decides to bike her home, and the girls quickly part after Max sneaks Lucas a chaste goodbye peck.

"We've still got a few hours before bed," Mike says. "Wanna rent a movie?"

Will nods. "Sure, but could we watch it at my place? I think Mom

doesn't want me to be out late tonight."

"How come?" Lucas asks. "She's not *still* scared about, you-know-what, is she?"

Will doesn't like the judgemental tone one bit, but tries to keep his expression neutral. He shakes his head and looks directly into Lucas's eyes.

"No. She's just... uh... a bit worried from the news this morning. About AIDS and all. You know, mom stuff."

Lucas looks bewildered. "That's not mom stuff. Or even normal people stuff. Only queers catch that disease. Serves 'em right anyways-"

"Lucas! Enough!"

It's Mike now, and his voice has broken into a yell. Mike inserts himself into Lucas's personal space, and the other boy lightly shoves him back.

"What's with you?"

"What's with *you* , saying shit like that?"

“Ladies, ladies!” Dustin wedges himself between the other two. “Actually, Lucas, girls can catch it too. But he is right, Mike, it’s mostly qu- uh, gay people.”

He looks over to Will, and Will finds himself momentarily reeling from the sudden eye contact. *Wait, does Dustin...?* But then he catches Dustin’s glance, and sighs to himself. *Oh. He wants help.*

“It’s a stupid thing. Sorry I brought it up. But please, can we just go to my place?” He waits for three nods before continuing. “We should hurry. Family Video closes soon.”

Mike shuffles in next to him as they ride, and neither of them say a word.

Family Video is a favourite store for Will, both because it’s cheap and for atmospheric reasons. There’s something about that scent - a combination of peppermint, lime, and air freshener - that smells strangely homely, and he gets to take it all in at once as he opens the door. He’s no window shopper, but he’s come here several times just to browse. Maybe the store is so homely because it’s a disorganized mess. Boxes of unshelved tapes and VHS cassettes are strewn across the floor, occasionally causing a klutzy customer to trip. He’s *convinced* that the boxes next to the adult section are there to purposefully humiliate people, or at least that’s what he tells Mike. And Mike always believes him.

But this time, there’s a familiar fixture at the front counter. Will’s not the least bit surprised that Steve Harrington of all people found a job here - he’s everywhere. What does surprise him is the pretty teen with dirty blonde hair who leans in and lightly taps Steve on the nose before snickering at him. Steve found another girlfriend? No. Wait.

That doesn't seem right. Is she just a friend? That doesn't seem right either. Boys and girls don't act like that if they aren't dating.

Dustin notices Steve immediately and runs over to say hi, while Lucas heads straight to the horror section. So much for not scaring Joyce too much. Mike has wandered off somewhere, so Will decides to say hi with Dustin.

"Heya, Byers!" Steve greets him. "Looking for anything?"

"No, thank you."

"Dingus, is this another one of your kids? This one has manners! Consider me *shocked*," the girl jokes. "I'm Robin."

"I'm Will."

He feels overcome by a sudden shyness, so he tucks his head back. This girl, Robin, isn't quite intimidating, but something about her is oddly prescient. The smile she gives him is subtle, but it burns into the back of his mind. It's warm like Mike's smiles, but also offputting, like when Troy smiles before shoving him. It's like she can see through his act, and it's uncomfortable.

"Uh, I'll just go find Mike," he blurts, and wanders around the isles in search of his best friend.

Mike is in the romance aisle, weirdly enough, and his eyes are

darting from box to box. He's so intensely focused that when Will taps him on the back, he yelps and gives a look akin to a kid getting caught stealing cookies.

"AH! Oh, hey Will. I was... uh, there wasn't anything good in the horror section, so... oh, or the mystery section, or the sci-fi section, or-"

"Ok Wheeler, I get it. Don't worry, I won't tell Lucas or Dustin you're into shitty teenage rom-coms. Might tell Max though."

"I am *not* ."

"It's ok, Mike. As a fellow single mom in her 30's, I understand your plight."

"Will," Mike whines. It's endearing in the same way an overly affectionate puppy is.

"Wait till El hears *this* ."

"Don't you dare." Mike's stifled laugh betrays him.

Will just smiles back. And then he hears a voice.

“Oh, hey kids.” It’s Robin. *Ah shit.* “If you’re looking for sextapes, wrong isle. Unless you aren’t and want some advice. I’m only a single mom in her teens, so I’m not quite an *expert* like Will here, but I’m sure there’s something raunchy enough.”

Will would find the sheer redness of Mike’s face funny if he wasn’t probably just as florid. Mike walks away *immediately* , and Will is left to awkwardly stare at Robin.

“Uh. Are there any horror romance films? Mike likes horror.”

“Any movie with marriage is a horror film by definition, isn’t it?” Robin winks at him.

“I... guess so?”

“Man, you’re no fun. When I saw you flirting with Mike, I thought I could have some fun, but nope. No witty comebacks for old Robin.”

“Flirting?! I wasn’t flirting!” That wasn’t flirting, Will. You aren’t a romantic person. And Mike’s not a girl anyways. He’s your best friend. Bad Will.

“Sure, sure. Will, you’re what I call a kindred spirit.” When he gives her a look, she adds, “It’s when two people are connected by something they both share. Like being different from others. You’re weird, I’m weird. So if you want to talk about, well, *stuff* , just come here in the afternoons.”

Something compels Will to agree. He's not exactly sure what Robin means, but something about what she said just *clicks* with him. Because yeah, she *is* weird, in a cool way. It's kind of like Jonathan, who's also cool-weird.

"Ok. I will."

She reaches out to fistbump, and he takes it.

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They eventually decide on *Return of the Jedi* when they can't decide on anything else. It's a good fallback movie, especially on those days where Will's ambivalence towards horror and Lucas's passionate hatred for romcoms are in conflict. Joyce acts surprisingly cheery given her earlier melancholy, but Will sees her face droop when she thinks he's focused on a fight scene. Halfway through the movie, she politely excuses herself, and Will lets out a soft sigh.

"Hey, you ok?" Mike asks.

"Yeah."

"Is your mom ok? Something's up, Will," Mike says, lowering his voice to a whisper. He leans in towards Will's ear, unbeknownst to Lucas and Dustin who are fixated on Carrie Fisher's outfit.

“Is it the AIDS thing? Is that why you guys are worried?”

Huh. Mike can be surprisingly observant, but this time it's to Will's dismay. He just nods, and Mike reaches out and softly holds Will's hand. The touch is light, fuzzy, intimate, but the warmth makes him realize how cold he is. Will gathers the courage to make eye contact, and his best friend flashes a half-smile at him, though it's masked by the darkness.

“Don't worry. I'll keep you safe from it. Promise. You can tell your mom that too.”

“Ok. Thanks, Mike.” Will tries to smile back.

They don't exchange another word until Dustin breaks the silence during the end credits, talking about how cool Vader's sacrifice was and rambling about theories for a possible sequel. Mike instantly wrests his hand free from Will, and Will looks away to hide his frown. *Don't act like this. It's a stupid hand, Will. You're fine. You don't need babying from Mike. He's not your freaking mom.*

“Shit, it's dark out. I should get going,” Lucas says, and he gets up, with Dustin following suit.

Will walks them to the door and says, “thanks for coming over, guys. See you tomorrow.”

“Bye, Will! Come on, Mike.” Dustin says.

“You guys go ahead. I’m gonna stick around for a bit.”

“You sure, man? We can wait,” Lucas offers, but Mike shakes his head and waves to them to go.

Moments later, the two boys are gone, and an amicable silence joins Mike and Will on the Byers’ front porch. A gentle breeze blows across the starry sky, and Will finds himself basking in the freshness of the night. Moments later, Mike’s voice cuts the silence.

“Can I sleep over tonight? It’s really late, and mom will probably get mad at me for breaking curfew...”

Will knows that Mike doesn’t have a curfew anymore, but nods and says he’ll ask his mother. But when he enters Joyce’s room, the woman is half sprawled on her bed, yawning loudly and rubbing her eyes, and he doesn’t want to bother her any further. Stealthily, he pulls the door shut and returns to the porch.

“She’s fine with it. You should probably call your mom, though. She won’t get mad over a non-existent curfew.”

While Mike is busy, Will heads to the washroom and splashes water across his face. He looks up to see an exhausted boy in the glass in front of him. Will notes the rapid blinking, eyes strained red. The boy’s face is falling slightly, and Will catches him yawning. But when

he returns to his room, he's more wide awake than ever.

It's Mike. Next to his bed. Looking at... *oh no* . Shit. His pills. The ones he forgot to put away. It just has to be the *one* day that Mike decides to have an impromptu sleepover.

Mike whirls around to face him immediately, pity evident in his expression. Both boys stumble to say something, but nothing coherent emerges. Both stammer and stutter for a beat until Mike manages to blurt something out.

"W-will! Sorry, I was just, uh, well... I was just here, and I saw these on your table, and uh, are they - you know..."

"Uh, it's for a sickness, and-" Will stops himself half-sentence. *Why do I suck at lying on the spot? Stupid. So stupid.*

"You can tell me the truth. I won't tell anyone. And friends don't lie. So, uh, are they-"

"Yeah. Antidepressants. Sorry."

"Don't apologize. You haven't done anything wrong. I was just surprised. Didn't know you could even get these before turning eighteen." His eyes grow cold. "How long?"

"Since last summer. I started to take them after, you know-"

“Don’t bring it up. *Please* don’t bring it up. I don’t wanna think about it ever again.”

“Mike... I’m still so sorry about that.”

And he is. *It* was the stupidest mistake ever made by anyone, probably. Will still finds himself biting his lips and shivering when he thinks back to it. No point bringing *It* up with Mike again, because who knows how painful it must be for him.

“It’s ok, Will. Well, it’s not, but I forgive you anyways. And I’ll forgive you every time. You’re my best friend, you know that? No. Matter. What.”

Mike walks over to Will and hugs him so tightly that Will needs to tap his back to lower the sudden pressure on his rib cage. But still, the embrace feels nice after a long day; he could honestly get used to it. It’s not quite a *mom hug*, but it’s nice in a different way. Mike’s touch has always been different; perhaps it’s the way he treats Will’s skin as delicate, letting his fingers glide along the creases and cuts. Or maybe it’s just that fiery passion in the initial brushing of arm and body. Mike somehow manages to be both firm and gentle, and Will lets himself just forget everything else.

Will breaks the contact, and he goes to his closet and pulls out his sleeping bag. Mike takes the offer and sniffs it. Odd. Probably checking for a stench or something, Will thinks. Once both boys are lying on the bed and Will’s night light is on, Will whispers a quiet goodnight to him.

“Night.”

“Goodnight, Will. Sweet dreams.”

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His dreams are sour.

If *this* is even a dream. Will's in the void - a black hell where drops of water reverberate like thunder, and where footsteps break the ominous silence that threatens to cloud his mind. Usually, his nightmares are about the Upside Down, but somehow this feels drearier. In the Upside Down, there are at least the distortions of familiar images. He can cling to the shadows of his home or school or Mike's home. But in the void, his only neighbours are pitch black and a thin layer of water at his ankles.

Will tries to take a deep breath, but it devolves into him hyperventilating, and moments later he is curled into a ball, gripping himself in a futile struggle to hold *something*. Why did Mike let go of his hand all those hours ago? Why didn't he talk to his mom and say sorry, or pray more, or do literally anything differently? *Why the hell is it always me? Because I'm fucked up, that's why. I'm a sad, weak, pathetic loser like they say I am. That's why the Demogorgon wanted me. I'm easy prey for evil dogs and stupid bullies and most of the country.*

“Stop crying, pussy.”

The voice is loud and jarring, and Will's ears ring from the volume. It's also familiar; where has he heard it? It's the voice of a million nightmares - of broken glass and ripped drawings and his crying mother.

"Be a man and get the hell up!"

He's shaking even harder now, because he *knows* that voice. No. He won't get up. He *can't* get up because he'll get eaten alive. They're all waiting in the shadows, hiding in the darkness. Demogorgons, Mind Flayers, bullies, parents, millions of them waiting to claim him. Nobody can save him now.

"I didn't raise a dandelion, Will. You're sickening. You fucking *fairy*."

The voice diminishes and fades into the chaos, and Will feels something sharp on his back and he screams. Will screams like never before, and he can't turn around. All he can do is get up and run. But the void doesn't change, continuing into infinity like an infinite staircase, and his adrenaline rush can't last forever.

So he turns around.

First, he sees the claws. Sharp as spears, they protrude from the creature's four arms, and they are accompanied by a set of spiked nails along its fingers. Next are the eyes. They shine red as blood and fiery as hell. Will can't look for more than a second, but it's like he sees a devil reflected in them. And last is the mouth. Specifically, that

horrid smile straight from a slasher movie. The creature flashes it's teeth, and Will sees poison dripping down. Drops splatter in the water, causing it to discolour, looking eerily like vomit.

It's an insect. A *parasitic, venomous* insect. And it's going to kill him.

He couldn't hear less about the head-splitting noise he's making, or the violent nausea he feels looking at the beast. *Run. Flee. Get away. Get out NOW.*

Wait. Footsteps. Not his own, not Mike's, not anyone else's. Who else is here? No, there's no time to think. So he runs in a random direction, but the footsteps are still following him. They're light, like gentle taps on the water's surface, but something screams *danger* and he's not about to stop to check.

"You can't run from the truth."

It's a man's voice, and it's a bit higher-pitched than he's used to hearing. Will continues to run, but quickly peeks behind him. He catches a glimpse of a man with black hair, donning a lab coat. And he's wearing a ruby red earring on his right ear.

And then it all crumbles.

Slowly, the water starts to dry, and the insect's horrifying screeches soften. Lab-coat man vanishes, and everything grows black.

The next thing he sees is Mike, hovering over him, shaking him wildly.

“Will! Will! Wake up, *please* wake up. I’m here, I promise and- Will!”

“M-mike?” His voice is a grunt, and he realizes he’s crying.

“Shh. It’s ok. You don’t need to talk.”

Wordlessly, Mike wraps his arms around Will’s waist and props himself onto the bed. Will adjusts so that his face leans into Mike’s chest. When he feels the wetness on Mike’s shirt, he tries to pull away, but Mike pulls him back in. Moments pass, silent sans a few suppressed sobs.

“You’ll be ok. I’m right here.”

“What time is it?” It’s stupid that he chooses to ask *that* , but he’s not in the mood to think.

“Maybe midnight? Don’t worry, your mom is asleep, I think. I closed the door before you started screaming.”

“Sorry. I’m so sorry. I’m so useless.”

Mike's voice is sharp. " *Don't* say that. You're anything but useless. Everyone has nightmares. I had one yesterday."

"You did?"

"Mhmm. Wanna talk about yours?"

"No."

Will lets go of Mike and shuffles back, but he keeps hold of the boy's hand. *Ok, maybe I'm a child, but I don't care* , he thinks. *Screw grown-ups.*

"Wanna go back to sleep?" Mike asks. Will notes the hesitance in his voice.

"No. Sorry, I know there's school tomorrow, so you can-"

"Nah, I'm not that sleepy." As if on cue, Mike yawns. "Ok, a bit. But I'm not going to sleep until you're ok, and you can't stop me."

Will has no energy to argue, so he just nods. Mike lies down, and Will plops down next to him. Will thinks about leaning against Mike's chest, but that's probably pushing it, so he keeps his distance and rolls onto his side, back turned to Mike.

“Wanna talk, Byers? About anything? Usually helps.”

“I’m tired.”

“I’ll just ramble then. Is that ok?”

“Yeah. I’m listening.”

“Tomorrow’s the first day of high school. Honestly, I’m kind of excited? But also scared? Nancy told me it’s a lot more work, but apparently the science is really cool. She said it was ‘nerd paradise.’ And like, apparently people get really hot in high school. Lucas told me that, which is weird cuz he’s dating Max and all. Wonder what the girls are gonna look like...”

Girls. Right. Girls. I’m supposed to have a crush on a girl. Maybe that’ll finally happen this year. Hopefully.

“Do you like any?” Will asks.

Mike doesn’t reply, and Will worries he might have pushed too much. But then, he speaks: “Well no, not right now.”

“Not even El?”

That earns a sigh from Mike. "I told you, we're better off as friends. I don't like her that way. And we're great as friends. I like you more though."

Wait, what are you-

"You're my *best* friend, you know?"

Oh. That's a good thing. I'm still his best friend. Yeah, I'm... happy. Super happy.

"Yeah."

"So I don't mind if you want to ask her out. It's worth a shot."

"What? Where'd you get that idea?"

"Oh, I thought that you... you were looking at us funny today, so I thought you were jealous of me."

Will turns around to see Mike on his side, a small frown on his face. Will has an incredibly strange urge to laugh, but he only lets out a muffled giggle. *Mike, you moron, you totally have the wrong idea. I'm not jealous of you. Well, I kind of am.*

Mike *did* have a girlfriend, after all, even if it was only for a short while. He's probably never going to have one at this rate. No girl will ever like him anyways, though honestly he's just as worried he'll never like them. If he doesn't get a crush soon, then... No. He can't accept that possibility. Even if it's true, he's going to run until his legs fall off. Running away and hiding are what Will Byers does best.

"I'm not interested in El. We're just friends."

"Phew. Ok. That would be awkward."

"Definitely," he says.

They talk a while longer, but soon enough Will's exhaustion catches up, and he lets out a sudden yawn.

"Someone's sleepy. Wanna try going to sleep?"

"Uh, I'm not sure..."

The last thing he wants to do is return to the void, but he can't keep Mike up all night either.

"Alright, then scoot over."

“Wh-what?”

“If we squeeze, there’s enough room for two. But you’re gonna have to move.”

“Mike, you don’t have to do that.”

“I *want* to do this. Do you want me gone?”

“No!” He says it immediately.

“Then move over. Come on!”

Will scoots over to the edge of the bed, nearly rolling off. He hands Mike a spare pillow, and reluctantly pulls the blanket over both of them. The initial bravado seems to have worn off his best friend, and the boy is flushing slightly. They’ve always been close, but this is a little intimate even for them. Bitterly, Will wonders if Mike is remembering a similar experience with El.

“Is this ok?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Ok. Uh... goodnight again.”

“Goodnight, Will.”

This time, his dreams *are* sweet.

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The first thing he notices is Mike curled up on the bed next to him, hair a complete mess. His hair has never been tame per se, but Will finds himself glancing in disbelief at the labyrinth of dark curls before him. Mike turns to him groggily and stretches a bit, before rolling over again.

The second thing he notices is that the door is hinged open. Mike had said he closed it. Will turns to look at his bedside clock, and sure enough, it's ten minutes after they were supposed to get up. *Shit. Someone came in and saw us.*

Luckily, Mike doesn't seem to notice, and Will gives him a hard shake and jolts the other boy awake.

“What was that for?”

“We're already ten minutes late. And in case you haven't noticed, we have school.”

“Sheesh, you’re not a morning person.”

While Mike gets ready, Will tiptoes into the kitchen. He’s about to stay silent when he hears his mom gasp from the other room. When he rushes in, she looks right at him in horror, hand covering her mouth.

“Mom?! Are you ok? What’s wrong?”

Mike then rushes into the room, fully dressed. Jonathan follows suit, a grim expression on his face.

“Oh, hello sweetie. Listen, it’s nothing important.”

The radio drones in the background: “His death was a surprise for many, but rumours are already spreading. Reports from Hawkins officials suggest that he was a serial philanderer, so any women in contact with him should see a health professional immediately. Apparently, he died five days ago in Springfield, but as he was not a resident, authorities withheld the information...”

“Mom.” It’s Jonathan. “What happened?”

“Hawkins had it’s first AIDS-related death. The casualty was... Keegan Gray.”

Mike looks shocked. Pale, even. “Wait, but that’s...”

“Yeah. It’s your high-school English teacher.”

Parasitic. Venomous. And Deadly. Will looks at Mike, then to Jonathan, and finally to his mother, and horror lines all three of their faces. He stiffens.

This is only the start.

Notes for the Chapter:

Poor Will :(

I've been working on this fic for a few months, and I'm super excited to finally start writing and posting it! I'm going to try to update this weekly if college doesn't drown me haha. I've also planned a couple of side-stories/one shots in this universe that feature different characters (Will and Mike are our POVs this time).

If you liked the chapter, let me know! I'm always trying to improve my writing too, so critiques are welcome. Oh, and if you've got any predictions or ideas, I'll be glad to hear them :) Hopefully I can improve this fic as I go along. So yeah, any comments are always welcome because I love to read them.

2. A Town in Trouble

Notes for the Chapter:

Quick heads up - some homophobic language in this and subsequent chapters

August 19, 1985

The omnipresent silence hangs in the air, but nobody can muster any words to articulate the feeling. It's a mix of horror, shock, and fear, and it's pervasive. Will has always been afraid of the disease, perhaps more than a *normal* kid should, but to have it enter his life so directly, after that nightmare last night... It's not the most pleasant thing to wake up to.

He's still not sure what to make of the dream. Did it mean anything? Will feels stupid for even considering that possibility, but he can't forget the Mind Flayer. For every portentous dream he's had, there's been a hundred with no purpose beyond terrifying him. Even then, he can never let himself forget. He'll never forget.

The radio is the first to speak.

"We understand that understandably, everyone is panicking right now. But remember, we are a community, and with the Grace of God, we will survive this ordeal together. Unfortunately, reliable sources inform me that Mr. Gray has slept with many local women. How he did this while catching the homosexual disease is currently unknown. If any woman... or child has had sexual contact with this man, please visit Hawkins Hospital *immediately*. We will have clergy present throughout the morning for further support."

The room is quiet, and all ears are trained on the machine, awaiting more news. Eventually, Jonathan forcefully turns off the radio and looks drily at his family and Mike. Will doesn't like the look on his face. Jonathan always looks slightly troubled or sullen - like a raincloud in summer, according to Mike. But now he just looks exhausted, and Will feels his heart tremble.

"Will, Mike, I don't think you should go to school today," Joyce says. "You can take the day off. The disease is spreading to people we don't know, and I don't want you sick."

And there it is. Will expected as much from her. But he only gets one first day of high school, and not showing up would scare Max, Lucas, and Dustin. Besides, he wants to know how they are doing; Lucas in particular is probably eating his words from yesterday.

"Mom, I'll be fine - *we'll* be fine."

"Honey, I know you want to see everyone, but it's too dangerous and-"

"Mrs. Byers, we have to face it someday. You know that AIDS won't disappear overnight. And we're a Party. We stick together. We've faced far worse than a disease we can't catch." Mike interrupts.

He sneaks a glance at Will so quickly that Will wonders if he imagined it.

“ No. I’m not risking my son or his best friend. There’s no cure. If you catch it, you’ve forfeited your life...”

“Mom.” Will turns to see a firm frown on Jonathan’s face. “Enough. I love Will as much as you do. But you’re worrying about nothing. So far, it’s only been through sex- uh, blood exchanges. Mr. Gray dying doesn’t make it any more infectious.”

“Jonathan, be reasonable with me.”

“I am. I’ll drive them both and pick Will up after school. He’ll be with Mike and the other kids the whole time. It’s perfectly safe, but you need to trust me.”

Jonathan’s eyes look just a bit brighter, with an intensity Will rarely sees in his brother. The last time he saw that *look* was, well, when they reunited after the Upside Down. Will nudges himself next to Jonathan and looks up at Joyce. He tries to mimic his brother’s intimidating gaze. It’s probably a terrible attempt - Mike’s hushed giggle isn’t subtle - but his mother finally cracks a smile.

“Alright. I do trust you, Jonathan. But you’re taking them *directly* to school. I don’t want to hear any excuses on that. Is that clear?”

“Yes, mom. Will, hurry and get dressed. We’re already running late. Mike, help me put away the bags and then get some breakfast.”

“Yes, sir!” Mike does a play salute and grabs the boys’ backpacks before marching out the door.

Will walks to his brother and whispers a quiet *thank you*. Jonathan quietly runs a hand through his unbrushed mop in return before Will scampers off. He shrugs himself into yesterday’s jeans and an old t-shirt, with a long-sleeved sweater on top.

And then he hears voices in the hallway. It’s unmistakably his mom and Jonathan. But they’re talking low and quiet, which means he’s clearly not supposed to hear. *What could they be talking about behind my back? Wait. Oh, shit. I forgot. Oh no.*

The door. The slightly opened door. One of them totally just saw him sharing a bed with his best friend. Immediately, he tries to brainstorm a defense - he’s not like *that* - but the only thing occupying his mind is panic. Should he say something to Mike? Interrupt them? Tell them the truth and worry them more? Maybe there’s another explanation, but he can’t think...

So he quietly footsteps along the hall. He’s mastered the art of rapidly shifting his body weight to minimize the noise from their creaky floorboards. It’s an important survival skill in alternate dimensions, after all.

“Mom, what’s the real reason? You know how AIDS is transmitted.” Jonathan’s voice has a thin layer of accusation. “They won’t be sick. So why stop their first day of school?”

“Jonathan, honey, you wouldn’t really understand. AIDS has it’s...

rumours. People in Hawkins are shitty, really shitty. And those horrible boys like Troy and James, they hurt the kids who are most vulnerable. You know what they say about Will.”

“B-but he’s not actually gay.”

Well, that eliminates one option. So it was Mom who saw me and Mike. Does she think that we’re...? No, that would be ridiculous. Mike’s not gay, no chance. And neither am I... at least, I hope not. I’m just a late bloomer, like Lucas says. Nothing queer here. I’ll just tell her that.

“When has that stopped Will from coming home bleeding and scraped? I’m a mom. I *can’t* think about my son getting hurt and just take it. I’m not strong enough.”

“Yes you are. You’re the strongest one in this house. You can’t let the bullies win. Will knows that. Every Byers knows that. I know you do too, Mom, because it was you who taught us that.”

In that moment, Will loves his family more than he ever has.

He decides to enter the room at that moment, pretending to act innocent. He looks all over the room, making eye contact with every object and being except his family. But in the one glance he does take, he spots the relief on Joyce’s face. *Don’t worry, Mom. I’m not losing to an epidemic. Or a bully. Only queers lose to bullies.*

“Hey Jonathan, hurry up,” he cries. “Weren’t you the one saying we

were gonna be late?”

“Uh yeah, coming.”

Satisfied, Will heads to the Byers’ Ford Pinto to talk to Mike.

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Hawkins residents aren’t the brightest individuals, but they certainly have a sense of community. An overly zealous one, Will notes, as he, Mike, and Jonathan drive through the center of town. The streets are *packed* with protestors, men and women of all ages holding their Bibles in one hand and angry signs in the other. Their hatred is too heavy to hold in a hand, so instead they hold it in their hearts. The sight is terrifying - a long chain of anger and fear that crowds the streets. The slogans they chant are no better.

“God will never forgive gays!”

“Save Hawkins! Fight AIDS!”

“No quarter for queers! Remove deviants!”

Will turns away from the window and looks over to Mike. But this time, he finds no comfort in his best friend. Mike is visibly shaking, and he’s rapidly breathing. He brings his hands to his face and buries his expression there, with only a muffled groan escaping. He’s

absolutely distraught, and Will feels himself break at the sight.

“Mike. Mike. Hey, don’t listen to them,” he says, tone soft. “They’re all wrong.”

Mike doesn’t say anything, so Will removes his seatbelt and slides over to him. He moves his hand to Mike’s face and slowly touches his hands. Mike’s hands are cold, a far cry from last night’s warmth on the couch, but he accepts the touch and uncovers his face. He doesn’t look Will in the eyes, but instead stares at their joined hands. Will decides to do the same.

“Don’t listen to them, Mike. They don’t know what the hell they’re talking about.” Jonathan’s voice is cool and level. “People who live to hate others aren’t worth anything. Right, Will?”

“Yeah.”

“Ok,” Mike croaks. He sounds hoarse, but neither Will or Jonathan comment.

The ride passes without another word, but Will keeps his grip on Mike’s hand.

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Will’s been to Hawkins High School many times. It’s right next to Hawkins Middle School, so it’s not an unfamiliar sight by any means.

Even still, it's another feeling entirely to step inside as a student. Another milestone, one he had once given up on reaching. *Four more years, and then I'm free to go wherever I want. Free to leave this hateful hell.*

They're a few minutes late, but the front of the school is bustling with teenagers saying goodbyes to their parents and meeting with friends. Strangely, nobody seems unsettled or on edge like the angry townsfolk. Will wonders if the news hasn't spread everywhere yet. It's strange, since Hawkins only has one news station.

Jonathan hands him his backpack and pats him lightly on his head. Will jokingly brushes his hand off, but it's not like hair ruffling can mess up a bowl cut. He turns to look at Mike, who now has an excited smile on his face. Or a fake smile. Sometimes, even Will can't tell. He hopes it's the former.

Jonathan leans in and says, "If you need *anything* during the day, call me at work. Don't worry about if I'm working, just—"

"Don't coddle me, Jonathan! I'm fine, don't worry. I'm not going to let the bullies win."

Jonathan's eyes go wide. He's about to say something, but then just nods and gives Will a thumbs up. Moments later, his brother is gone.

"Holy shit, there's so many people here," Mike says. "Let's find the Party before class starts."

Luckily, they manage to locate Max within a few minutes. She's right by the front steps, waving a hesitant goodbye to presumably Billy. She's dressed in a striped yellow shirt and blue shorts, and her hair swings about wildly in the gust from moving cars. Skateboard in hand, she looks around, expressionless, though she perks up when she sees Mike and Will.

"Byers. Wheeler. There you are! Are Lucas and Dustin here yet?"

"No idea," Will says. "But it's late, so they're probably inside. Say, did you, uh, drive through downtown on the way here?"

Max nods. "It's terrible. Evil, even. Bothered you too, huh?"

"Yeah," Mike says. "Seems we don't have an English teacher anymore, so who knows what we're doing in class."

The three walk up the door, and the school foyer is *packed*. Students scuttle like rats in a labyrinth, bumping and shoving each other in confusion as they attempt to find lockers, get timetables, and locate their friends. Mike sighs at the chaos, and when he suggests they try to sneak off to the side, Will's all too eager to agree. *Stay away from crowds. Nothing good comes out of looking for bullies.*

The trio shuffle through the crowd, looking for their friends first. Eventually, Mike spots Lucas speaking to an older student, probably a senior. He calls out to the boy, but the shout is engulfed by the din of the mob.

"I'll get him. Gah, there's so many people," Max says, and she walks

over to greet her boyfriend.

Will looks over to Mike, who seems to be listening to the crowd. Will faintly hears the words *Mr. Gray* and *plague* and tries to tune out the rest. So the students *have* heard. They're just whispering behind closed doors, like always. They think they're subtle, but he can see every glance, every whisper, every stare, and each one burns into him with scalding clarity.

One day, they'll show their true colours. But any painting made of those colours will be the darkest thing I've ever seen.

The next thing he sees is the floor when something makes contact with his head.

"Will!" It's Mike. "Are you ok? What hap- TROY!"

"Oh hey, fairy number two. Sorry, might have hit your boyfriend a bit too hard. But you should stay away. Wouldn't want to catch it too."

Will's head is pounding, but he slowly sits up and turns to see Mike sandwiched between him and Troy. The other boy is menacing as ever, bearing a haughty smirk. Unfortunately, Troy seemed to have gained a few inches over the summer, because he's a fair bit taller than Mike. The bully laughs drily and flips the bird at them. Mike inches closer.

"Fags don't belong here. Get the hell out of our town before you infect everyone with that stupid AIDS. Nobody wants a piece of fruit

ruining their school. It's already tainted by that one dead loser! Get out, queer! Get out!" Troy's rant has devolved into screaming, and a small crowd seems to have formed.

"Go to hell, Troy," Mike says.

"Fuck off, Wheeler. And *you* ," he turns to Will, "you should have stayed dead, zombie boy. It's because of you that we'll all get AIDS. Stupid queer."

Ok, enough of this . He's indignant at this point. In a flash, Will gets up, head still pounding. He winces, but then gathers the energy to shout back:

"If you die of that stupid disease, it serves you right. Now leave us *alone* ."

Troy looks surprised by that, and when Will presses forward, he takes a step back. The boy's glance steadily transforms from intimidating to apprehensive. *He really thinks I have it. That I can just infect him. What a moron.*

No, wait. This isn't just apprehension, he notes. He's seen Troy look uncomfortable before - disturbed, even - but this is straight up terror. Those brown eyes lack their characteristic smugness. Those filthy hands are shaking, droplets of sweat forming at an alarming rate. Troy quivers slightly, and Will takes another step forward.

“You pathetic mouth-breather. Death by AIDS isn’t painful enough for you.”

To his surprise, Mike *also* backs away, doing a double take. He steps away from his protective position and unceremoniously shuffles to the side. A new emotion spreads across his face - one Will has never seen before. It’s a bit like shock, but also anger and fear. Is that... betrayal? No, that wouldn’t make sense.

“W-Will, this isn’t like you. You’re going a bit too far,” Mike whispers.

“I’m not going far enough. Don’t fucking tell me what’s too far when you didn’t just get hit in the head. I’m sick of this.” His voice cracks, and he knows he’s half-screaming.

Mike gasps, and Will knows it’s because he rarely swears. But he can’t help himself. He’s *pissed* .

“What the hell is going on here?!” Lucas storms over, shoving through the crowd. Max is right next to him.

“Seriously, Troy? Find someone else to bully! Unless you can take on four at once, in which case have at me. I’ll make you regret it.”

Max’s eyes are as fiery as her hair, and her expression brims with the intensity of ten stacks of dynamite near a lit fuse. Troy mutters something inaudible. She cracks her knuckles, and the boy seems to

notice the signals. He exhales and starts to walk away before turning back one last time:

“You don’t belong here, Byers. That’s all I have to say.”

And then he’s gone, and Will has to stand there, stewing in rage and bewilderment. *What was that? I’ve never been that angry over a stupid blow. That moment, I wanted to just... And I blew off Mike too. Will, you stupid, stupid fool. The hell’s wrong with you?*

“Let’s just get to class,” Lucas says. He pulls out a few timetables. “Here, guys, I grabbed your timetables when I couldn’t find you. Dustin was here earlier, but he said he needed to run to homeroom early. Mike, we’re in the same first and second period.”

“Oh. Awesome.”

Lucas frowns at that. “Something wrong, man?”

Will notices the curt glance Mike briefly throws at him. So two can play at that game, apparently. “Nah. Psychotic bullies are just tiring.”

“Clearly. What’d he say this time?”

“Oh, the usual. Just called me and Will fags.”

Will flinches slightly when he hears Mike say that. The slur never sounds pleasant, but there's something especially ugly about hearing it from Mike. It's so dissonant and out-of-place, like he's hearing his mom talk about politics, or Jonathan talking about his sex life, or his father giving him a compliment. It just doesn't belong.

"That's a fucked up thing to call you. Not surprising for Troy, though, he's a piece of shit. You're normal, Mike, don't worry. Not a queer thing about you."

And me , Will thinks. *Say that about me too, Lucas. I'm also normal, damn it. I'm normal...*

"Lucas, not cool. There's nothing wrong with that," Max chides, and from her tone it's clear this isn't the first dispute they've had on the matter. Her voice is cold, callous, and experienced.

"Yeah, yeah, you *lived in California* and all that. Heard all that bullshit before. Hawkins is different. But let's just drop this. No point ruining the first day of school any further. That stupid AIDS talk is everywhere as is."

"Agreed," Will says. "Let's just go to class. Looks like I'm with you, Max. And Dustin too."

As he and Max head off in the opposite direction, Will sneaks one more glance at Mike. The other boy doesn't dare to make eye contact, and instead has a staring contest with the floor tiles. Will shakes his head and turns to talk to Max.

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First and second period thankfully pass without incident. It's all the same stuff Jonathan complained about when they were younger; piles upon piles of tests and homework. Will just stares at the clock between brief periods of trying to focus. That *incident* from earlier is still fresh, and he just can't figure out what happened.

Troy's hit him before. He's called him names before. He's stolen his things, painted nasty words on his locker, and spread rumours about him. So what happened this time? *Mike said it himself; I don't do that. I never do that. Why did I do that?* And yelling at Mike like that too... especially after what he did last night. A pit rises in Will's stomach, and the nausea swells up as he drowns in his own idiocy. It's only when Max whispers that he looks sick that he realizes he's forgetting to breathe. So he does. It helps a little.

That confrontation with Troy unfortunately had an audience, and the whispers spread to his class like wildfire. They look at him like he's a foreign animal, a rabid one. The snickers and whispers are everywhere, and though he doesn't know their contents, they still bite into him. When the bell rings, Will feels *liberated* .

Soon after, they have recess, and the Party decide to explore the building to find a new hangout spot. Will suggests the library, but Lucas and Max both laugh at that. *Well, worth a try*, he thinks. They eventually decide on the bleachers next to the bustling basketball court, with a footnote to find another place in the winter.

When they sit, Will slides over to where Mike is. The boy looks a bit

cheerier than in the morning - a painfully low bar to set - but he's strangely silent.

"Mike? Uh, do you have a moment?"

"Sure."

"I'm, uh... sorry about this morning. I don't know what happened, and I didn't mean to yell like that."

"It's fine."

"Oh. Ok."

Mike doesn't say anything more.

"Are you ok?" Will gives him a sheriff's glance, and the lack of eye contact is enough of an answer.

"Yes, Will, I'm fine," Mike snaps. "Ask yourself that, maybe."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means that you don't make a fucking joke out of a disease that kills people."

It won't even kill you. If anything, it would probably kill m-

"Fine. You're right. I'm sorry." He lowers his head. "Really, Mike, I'm sorry."

Mike sighs. He then gives a half-smile, and Will returns the favour. It's not great, but he'll take it.

"S'ok. Looks like we have English next," Mike says. He pauses, and then adds, "Hey. Have they been bothering you?"

Will doesn't need to ask who *they* are. "A bit, yeah. But it's ok. I don't care what they think."

Mike doesn't blink. "If you say so. You're not fooling me, though. Let's head to class."

All five of them have English together, thankfully, and they all enter the English room in an awkward silence. The tension hits Will as he walks through the door like cool air in an air conditioned house on a summer day. It's a sudden rush of confusion, with nobody wanting to ask the dreaded question of what's about to happen. As he moves to a desk on the side of the room, Will notices Troy in the back of the classroom, picking at his shirt. *Well, just my luck. He probably wants revenge.*

Or does he? If he's noticed Will, Troy makes no effort to show it. Instead, the boy stares at his books and fumbles around his backpack, acting more innocuous than Will is used to seeing. Frankly, Will feels even *more* nervous at that.

Something tugs at his arm, and when Will turns around to see what Mike wants, he's *not* expecting to see what he does.

It's *him* . It's the man from Will's dream. At first, it doesn't register; the man isn't wearing a lab coat, but instead a red and blue striped flannel that screams 70s. Instead of khakis like his teachers, the man is wearing lumberjack jeans. His hair is done in an eye-catching style. It's an extreme crew cut, with strands of black locks neatly gelled at the top. He wouldn't even recognize the guy if it wasn't for that familiar ruby red earring on his right ear.

Like it or hate it, the man stands out. And when the realization hits Will, he breathes in so sharply that Dustin asks if he's ok. So his dream *did* mean something? Well, that's bad.

He scans his friends' reactions. Max is gazing at him intently, a slightly puzzled look on her face, but her eyes glimmer with a hint of recognition. Dustin seems curious, and Will notes his friend sizing the mysterious man up and down, hopefully not seeking fashion advice. Lucas is frowning *immediately* , and Will can feel the hostility in his friend's clenched fist. Mike... is staring at his book, like Troy was earlier. His eyes are glued to the thing, and when Will tries to wave at him, he ignores it. Will wonders what's so interesting about that book: *The Picture of Dorian Gray*?

Lucas leans over to the Party and says, "Something's off about that guy. I already don't like him."

Will nods. That much he can agree with. Why was it that Will saw him of all people in the same dream as a giant insect and his father?

The man looks patiently at the class of students, expression painfully stoic. Most people take the cue and shut up, though the conversation continues through glances.

"Hello, class." The man's voice is like Will remembers it, a bit higher-pitched but not quite feminine. "I'm Nick Benson, your new English teacher."

The murmurs in the back grow louder, and Will hears a few remarks of disbelief. *How? A new teacher? That quickly? With an epidemic in town?* He turns to Mike, who is now looking at him, equally confused.

"It's a bit short notice - as you can imagine - so I don't quite have a lesson plan ready. Instead, I'll spend the class trying to know you all better. Any volunteers want to tell us about themselves? It's the first day, so it's a good chance to make friends."

Not a single person raises their hand.

"Fair enough," Mr. Benson says. He moves to the chalkboard at the front of the room, and starts writing his name in chunky cursive letters. "I suppose I'll have to start."

A glint of sunlight reflects off his earring, and it appears to glow with a scarlet hue. Will hears a grunt from Max, who is rhythmically tapping her pencil against the desk. *Tap. Tap. Tap.*

“I’m from New York. Actually, I just moved from the Big Apple yesterday once I got the job. I teach English there too. Hawkins seems nice, minus the whole angry mob thing.”

Tap Tap.

“Let’s see...I played football when I was in high school, and I’m also the head guitarist for a music group in New York. Oh, and I write short stories for fun.”

Tap. Tap Tap. Tap.

Will’s about to turn and whisper at Max to stop, but Mike turns first. His best friend is wide-eyed, and Max simply nods to him. Will puts it all together a minute too late. *Oh. It was Morse code.*

Someone raises their hand, and when Mr. Benson points to them, they say: “Mr. Benson, are you engaged? You have an engagement ring?”

“Ah, this. No, I’m not. It’s just an old memory that I keep around.”

Will pokes Mike in the side, much to his irritation. “Mike, what did she say?”

“Nothing important. Don’t worry.” His expression is completely unreadable.

Another student asks a question: “Is it true that AIDS is horrible in New York?”

Mr. Benson’s face falls slightly. He moves in front of Mr. Gray’s old desk and sits on it, picking up a book and rocking it back and forth in his arms.

“Yes. The hysteria is far worse, particularly in the slums.”

The student doesn’t flinch. “Well, New York is full of fairies, so that makes sense.”

Everyone freezes. Then there’s an enormous thump, and Will jumps in his seat slightly. He scans around to see the source of the noise, before noticing the book Mr. Benson was noticing on the ground. He must have slammed it *hard*.

Mr. Benson’s eyes flare up, and Will feels that same intensity he felt in his nightmare. The older man has stopped moving or fidgeting and is giving a veritable *death stare* to the poor girl who said that. There’s no other way to describe it.

“What’s your name?”

The girl looks half ready to soil herself. “C-Cassidy. Sir.”

“Cassidy. That’s a pretty name. Shame it’s attached to an ugly view. Cassidy, I would like to make one thing very clear. In your other classes, and in this town, people say names about gay people. They’re called names like *queer* , *fag* , *fruit* , and all the rest. And what you say outside this room is nothing I can or will stop. But in this room, you are *not* about to spout that hatred. Have I made myself clear?”

“Yes, sir,” Cassidy mutters. “I’m very sorry, sir.”

“Forgiven.” Then, Mr. Benson’s face reverts to calm as quickly as it had changed to furious.

The man walks over to his desk and pulls out a small flag. Will recognizes it instantly; he’s seen the parades on TV, and all the protests. Without fail, that flag is always there. It’s made of six stripes of vibrant colour: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple. It’s a *rainbow* , and something about it is absolutely beautiful. Those colours blend together in a way that is delightfully serene. Truthfully, Will’s always enjoyed drawing rainbows, ever since that fateful day he drew a rainbow ship for Mike. That drawing has been long trashed, but others have taken its place. Rainbows have become a motif of sorts.

Unity. That’s what it is. The colours of that rainbow, they’re all united.

They're all different, but they're together.

Then the actual meaning sinks in, and his sensibilities are swapped with guilt.

"I suppose I should tell you kids something," Mr. Benson says. He puts the flag on the desk, and his eyes scan about the room. For a moment, Will and him make eye contact, and the gaze lingers just a moment too long for Will's comfort.

"I'm a gay man. And I'm proud of it."

Obscene murmurs spread between the students, quiet as the mumblings of a jury, but the collective judgement of *oh shit* is loud and clear. Mr. Benson stares straight forward, gaze unwavering, posture steady. He lets the revelation sink deep, breathing in the silence.

Will's eyes dart to Mike, and there's that same unreadable expression. It's not the glance of disgust on Lucas's face, or the mixture of shock and terror on Dustin's face, or the unusual smirk on Max's face. It's something different, like *something* is sinking in. Will prays to himself that this *something* isn't hatred.

No. Wait. He *has* seen this one before, but only once. Mike has the same look he gave Will when *It* happened. When both their worlds were being torn from beneath them - when their connection was to be severed forever. That expression is not hatred. It's denial.

Mr. Benson lets the class remain silent a few moments longer, then lets out a slight chuckle. “Well, I think I’ve said enough about myself. Unless you guys want to hear more, but something tells me to shut up. If not, I do have a book of dad jokes. Or dirty jokes, but perhaps I should wait till at least day two to get fired.”

To Will’s surprise, the class actually *laughs* at that. He looks around and sees a mix of responses: chuckles, grins, snickers, and even roaring laughter. His eyes wander to the back of the room and even Troy is struggling to not giggle a bit.

“Would anyone like to volunteer to go next? If not, I can always pick someone. Come now, don’t be shy!”

Nobody says anything. And then, a small squeak from the back of the room: “I’ll do it.”

“Oh, Cassidy! Well, go right ahead.”

So she does. She talks about her love of books and how she wants to become a writer. She apologizes again, saying she’s just really scared of AIDS and she didn’t mean to hurt him. Mr. Benson reassures her that she is safe, and she leans back in her chair, relieved. Tension dissipates from her body, and for the first time that day, Will feels a small glimmer of hope. Maybe, just maybe, things will work out.

After Cassidy, another student speaks. And then another, and another, and another. Max says she’s from California and loves skateboarding. Dustin talks about his pet cat and his mom’s casserole. Lucas silently says he’ll pass. Mike says that he’s always wanted to

write short stories, which earns a nod of approval from their teacher.

And then, it's Will's turn. "I'm Will Byers," he says. It's a fraction of the confidence he wishes he has, but it suffices.

Mr. Benson gives him a warm smile, and the whiplash from his nightmare is astonishing.

"Hi, Will. Go on."

"I- I like drawing. And D&D. And my friends." He looks over to Mike, who casually gives a thumbs-up. "That's it."

"Alright. Thank you for sharing. Well, that's everyone, so we're done for today. You can all head to lunch early. Next class, we'll start our unit on short stories."

A few students get up and practically run out of the classroom. Some give Mr. Benson a hushed *thank you* and walk out calmly. Others linger about for a few moments, chatting idly with their friends, before packing their bags and leaving. Will sees Max, Dustin, and Lucas walking out, and he's about to move to follow when he notices Mike not packing his things.

"Mike? You coming? We should hurry up cuz Lucas and the others left."

“You go ahead. I’ll join you. Save me a seat.”

“You sure? I can stick around.”

“No need. Go ahead. I’m going to talk to Mr. Benson.”

Something strikes Will as *weird* , though he can’t pinpoint why. Maybe it’s just him being uneasy over nothing, but something about Mike’s tone is odd.

“Will, hurry up. You should join them.”

“Alright.”

Will walks out of the classroom, and when curiosity overcomes him, he turns around to see Mike approach Mr. Benson. *I hope you know what you’re doing, Mike* , he thinks. *Because I’ve got a bad feeling about this.*

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm a bit busy tomorrow, so early update this week! This was a rather fun chapter to write, though kind of difficult because Stranger Things has such a huge cast aaaaaaah. Next chapter, we'll get to see Mike's POV! Plus, we get to meet Mr. Benson. What do you guys think of him?

As always, comments and concrit are welcomed :)

I'm always glad to read it. Till next time!

-Dan

3. Affinity

August 19, 1985

As class ends, the students clammer out of the classroom, but Mike stays firmly planted to his seat. There's something about that man - Nick Benson - something that disturbs him. Or, more accurately, it *intrigues* him. He's different. Mike knows an outcast when he sees one. There's a lot of tells: the lack of sustained eye contact, the fidgeting, the defensive body language. Funnily enough, Will has these tells too. Maybe *that's* where the intrigue comes from.

There's also the fact that Mr. Benson is gay. Mike can't deny that he's curious. There are no gay people in Hawkins, at least not to his knowledge. His father's said some nasty things about their single neighbour, and in hindsight Mr. Gray must have been gay. Even so, Mr. Benson is something else entirely. *Nobody I've met dresses or talks like that. It's so weird... like a girl, but also not. Girls don't play football or join bands. But boys don't do that other stuff. How could Troy or the others think Will or me are anything like him?*

Mike's reverie breaks when he feels Mr. Benson's gaze. It comes to his attention that he's the only other person in the room, and he awkwardly walks over to the desk.

"Uh, h-hi Mr. Benson, do you have a moment?" He can't contain the stutter.

"Of course. You're..." Mr. Benson puts his palm on his forehead. "Ah. I'm sorry. Name overload. You were.... Lucas?"

"I'm Mike. Mike Wheeler," he says, a bit more confidently this time.

"Right! Wait, *Wheeler*?!"

"Yeah. Do you know someone in my family?"

Mr. Benson looks down at his desk, and Mike notices that he's glancing at a newspaper. It's a copy of *The Hawkins Post*, and judging by the wrinkles on the pages, it's an old edition. Where did he find it? Certainly not at a newsstand this morning...

After a moment's hesitation, Mr. Benson says, "Yes. Your sister is in my English class. Nancy Wheeler. She did mention a little brother, now that I think about it."

"That's her." Mike rolls his eyes. "Sorry in advance."

Mr. Benson laughs, and it reminds him, strangely, of Robin's laugh. It's hardy and wild, but fully devoid of ill will. It's the least teacher-like thing he's ever seen; last he checked, no teacher in Hawkins besides Mr. Clarke has a personality of note.

"Advance apologies must run in the family. She said something similar. Now, did you want to talk to me about something?"

Mr. Benson gets up and opens a filing cabinet, withdrawing a stack of papers from behind the desk. He starts to organize the papers, neatly sorting them into piles, while Mike tries in vain to gather words.

“Ah, well I was- um, I’m not really sure how to ask.”

“Take your time. There’s plenty of paperwork left, anyways. You’d think my first day would be a little less busy,” he mutters.

Mike gulps, and steadies himself. *It’s just a question. It doesn’t mean anything if you ask. He won’t think anything of it...right? No, Mike. Stop that. It won’t turn you queer. Think of Will. Do it for Will.*

“Um, how- uh, how did you know you were gay?”

He flinches as soon as he says it. *Damn it. That came out wrong.*

Mr. Benson, to his credit, doesn’t react. He turns around from the cabinet - agonisingly slowly, at least to Mike - and looks him in the eye.

“Asking for a friend, I presume? Don’t look so terrified. Plenty of straight kids are curious about this stuff.”

But his lips have curled into a smirk, and Mike silently curses himself. For a gay man, he’s pretty smart. That, or his father is wrong about homosexuals being ‘incorrigably stupid.’ Not that Ted Wheeler being

misinformed would be a surprise. He barely pays attention to anything other than the Bible or Reaganomics. And that includes his family.

“Yeah. For a friend.” *No. Be honest. Trust him.* “Well, uh, I was also kind of curious.”

“Oh? Curious that you might be gay?”

“Wha- NO! No, not like that. I just, well, I like to learn about things. The... the church says a lot of things, and I wanna know if they’re true.”

He pushes his intrusive thoughts aside and focuses on believing what he’s telling his teacher. It fails spectacularly.

“I see. Well, let me ask you a question, then. How do you feel when you see a pretty girl?”

Mike thinks about that one for a moment. He feels a bit guilty at this, like the answer should be *instant*, but nothing springs to mind. He tries to think of El, all dressed up and beautiful at the Snow Ball. He tries to think of that night, the night he convinced himself that he was in love with an amazing girl.

But slowly, the mental image darkens and distorts. El’s frame shortens, and he feels her moving off into the distance. The blue and yellow lights in Hawkins gymnasium morph into red and green, and

suddenly he's sitting in his basement, Christmas lights strewn haphazardly along the walls. He looks to the walls and sees a drawing - it's his name, written in thick block letters, and underneath it is a rainbow. *That's Will's drawing, the one he gave me for my ninth birthday.*

Next to him is a boy, and his heart starts to beat a bit faster, though he can't fathom why. His legs start moving for him, and soon he's behind the boy. Mike gently taps him on the shoulder, and he turns around... no, *she* turns around. It's not a boy. It's El, head awkwardly shaven like the day he met her, wearing a Benny's Burgers shirt. Lost in thought, Mike finds himself thinking how her head would look like with a bowl cut. Wait. What?

Seconds later, he's back to reality. He notices that Mr. Benson has turned back to his paperwork, paying his little daydream no heed. He really should answer before the man gets suspicious; how long was that fantasy?

"A pretty girl? My heart starts to beat really fast, like I just ran a mile in Phys Ed. And I really want to hold her hand. And I'm just happy?"

Mr. Benson turns around again. "Well, you've answered your own question. That's how I feel with men. Nothing different. It's love all the same."

"Love?"

"Yes. Gay people can fall in love, just like you can," Mr. Benson says, his neutral face undercutting the amusement in his tone.

On second thought, it seems obvious. Honestly, he had never really thought of it. His father always described it so *sexually*- always the sodomy or the sinfulness or the ‘magic sex drugs.’ But love? Like, romantic love? Marriage love? Two men getting married just seems so *wrong*. Mike has a vivid imagination - he’s always bragged about it during D&D campaigns - but a wedding without a wife might be beyond even his limits.

“Will can fall in love?” He immediately shuts his mouth when he says it. “Wait, no, I didn’t mean... Will’s not....”

“Well, this just got interesting.”

Mr. Benson chucks the stack of papers he’s holding onto the table, and they scatter in a mess on impact. Mr. Benson rolls his eyes when he sees that, but he sits down and gives Mike his full attention nonetheless.

“So, you suspect your friend is gay? And you’re not projec- er, imagining it?”

Mike shakes his head furiously. “No. Well, he gets bullied a lot for it by Troy. He calls him really mean names, like f- never mind. But I guess I don’t really know. He doesn’t talk about it.”

Mr. Benson pulls out a pen from his lumberjack jeans and scribbles a note on a piece of looseleaf. Mike pretends to not look, but while Mr. Benson is looking away, his eyes skirt over a single word on the

paper. *Troy*. Well, that's not ominous in the slightest.

"Mike. Don't assume that sort of stuff," Mr. Benson says sharply. They make eye contact, and Mike sees the *no argument* in his eyes. *That's* the glance he's used to getting from teachers.

"I've been here one day, but Hawkins has made its opinions on me clear. I imagine you don't know many gay people here. But it's not because they don't exist. Will's going to be pressured to act a certain way, and if you start assuming things about him, the bullies will notice. And they'll make his life even worse. Are you and Will close?"

"He's my best friend," Mike answers. "Has been since we were five."

"Then for his sake, go along with whatever he does. If he really is gay - and bullies don't control whether he is - then he'll tell you himself. If he wants to"

That makes sense. But there's one thing that still confuses him.

"Then why did you tell everyone here you were gay? If it's so dangerous?"

"Some people can hide who they are. But I don't want to mask myself anymore. So I've made the choice to be open, regardless of what happens. That's all I'm going to tell you."

“Ok. Thank you, Mr. Benson.”

He doesn't know what compels him to say it. *Thank you* isn't something he usually feels compelled to tell any teacher but Mr. Clarke. That's something Will usually does for him. *Oh shit, I've been in here too long. Will's waiting for me. Looks like I still have fifteen minutes of lunch.*

Mr. Benson seems to read his mind: “Have a nice lunch, Mike. And don't bug your sister too much.”

= = =

The cafeteria is, surprisingly, rather crowded. The large flux of students is an odd thing to adjust to, given that Hawkins Middle School had the same number of students. Something about high school is so cramped, like the boundary between the personal and the public is constantly eroding. The faster pacing doesn't help either; it's been half a day, and Mike *already* feels like he's lagging a bit.

He spots the Party seated at the end of a long table, a few seats separating them from a rowdy pack of jocks. He's about to wave, but Will beats him to it, motioning to him rather frantically. When Mike approaches the table, his best friend practically jumps out of his seat.

“Mike! There you are. What kept you so long?”

“Oh, I was just-” *Talking about gay shit? Wondering about you?* “-just

asking Mr. Benson about his band.”

Will frowns. “Really?”

“Yeah. It’s pretty cool. Sorry I’m late.”

“Better late than never,” Max interrupts. “I was starting to worry Byers here wasn’t going to eat, period.”

Mike looks at Will’s lunch, and sure enough, the sandwich he packed in a rush is still unopened. Max, Lucas, and Dustin are all eating, though.

“You were waiting?”

Will gives him a sheepish smile. “I didn’t think you’d take that long. But it’s alright now. Let’s eat; I’m hungry.”

Mike takes the seat Will saved for him and pulls out his own sandwich. He wants to thank Will for the gesture, but a voice in his head tells him not to. It would be awkward, *sentimental* even. His dad never does it when his mom waits to eat dinner with him. *He always takes it for granted, now that I think about it. Mom always looks so hungry when he’s out late. And sad. But I guess she’s always sad.*

So he decides to be better. “Will? Thanks for waiting.”

Will gives him an innocent, confused look, like Mike is thanking him for breathing air.

“Don’t worry about it. So, Mr. Benson?”

“I like him. He’s cool.”

“I don’t know about that,” Lucas says, giving Mike a ‘*what are you doing*’ look. “He doesn’t look trustworthy. I just have a *feeling*.”

“Why’s that?” Max challenges. “Oh wait, we already know.”

“Max, stop starting this shit.” Lucas sounds tired.

“Then stop acting like shit.”

Mike wonders if this will eventually lead to their fifth breakup. Or is it the tenth? He’s lost count by now. It’s a miracle that they always gravitate back to each other, no matter how much they fight. It’s like they orbit each other, though a force far stronger than gravity holds them together. If only he and El could have been that.

When the breakup was still fresh, El had confided to him that she was open to starting it up again - so much for ‘just friends’ - but he brushed it off. At the time, he had felt something strange, a bit like

when he cheated on a test in middle school. The relationship was like an adrenaline rush, but when the high kicked off, he had no motivation to get back up. Thoughts of rekindling their love felt *dishonest*, and not just to El; it was like he was lying to himself.

“Guys,” he says. “Please stop. It’s not worth it. Liking Mr. Benson doesn’t turn you gay, if that’s what you’re wondering. And I don’t care who he is.”

It’s not even slightly true, but Max seems to believe him, judging from her approving nod and thumbs up. Lucas scoffs, and Dustin just shrugs him off.

“Fine. You keep your opinion, and I’ll keep mine. But it’s not like he’ll last beyond a week anyway. Queer survival rates haven’t gone up in recent years.”

Lucas punctuates his response with a telling scowl, and in the heat of the glare, Mike feels exposed. Lucas has this uncanny ability to stare down just about anyone, save Chief Hopper or an Eggo-deprived El. Mike’s been on the receiving end plenty, but the ferocity of the look still catches him off guard every time.

“*Enough* of this,” Dustin says. He frowns at both Lucas and Mike. “We’re all stressed, I get it, but can we wait till exams to be at each other’s fucking throats? We’re in high school, for Christ’s sake. Come on, Will, help me out.”

“Dustin’s right,” Will says, and Mike can hear his weariness.

“If we need something else to talk about, then it has to be Dorothy Parker’s haircut,” Max interrupts. “Bitch is giving Will a run for his money for the worst do.”

“Shut up.”

“No, she’s right,” Mike says. “We really need to head to Starcourt and get you a haircut. Your mom hasn’t looked at a fashion magazine since the 60s. That, or she *really* wants you to be John Lennon.”

Will huffs at that, but he makes no attempt to conceal the smile. He turns to look right at Mike, and his eyes glimmer even brighter than they did yesterday.

“Alright. Fine. You win. Next weekend?”

Mike laughs. “It’s a date.”

= = =

That night, the memory of his conversation with Mr. Benson is replayed at least fifteen times over in his mind. *Gay people can fall in love*. It’s so obvious, but somehow it had locked itself away in his mind, shutting the door with a dad-sized key. Or maybe a mom-sized key. Or a Troy-sized key.

He tries to think back to the first moment he saw Mr. Benson. It was so *strange*, seeing a man, a teacher nonetheless, show up in such an unusual outfit. His voice was weird, too; it sounded artificial at first, though he quickly got used to it. And that red earring... Max had told him after school that it was something gay people in California wear to signal themselves. So that's how she figured it out immediately. When she sent the word 'gay' by Morse code, Mike hadn't believed it. Sure, the guy was weird, but gay? Gay people in Hawkins?

And then he pulled out the rainbow flag, and Mike felt as giddy as a schoolgirl. Rainbows... He's always liked them, though it's mostly because of Will's fondness for them. When he saw that flag, he didn't think of some queer symbol; he thought of that day in kindergarten when Will borrowed his crayons and drew him a rainbow ship. His friend - his *bestest friend in the world* - was so damn happy when Mike told him he loved it. The teacher gave them an ugly look, but she had the face of a donkey anyway.

Then Lonnie saw the drawing, and it all went to hell.

"...Mike? Are you listening?"

Oh. Right. His mother was asking him something.

"Uh, sorry, mom. Was just thinking about something."

"Don't try too hard or it might fry your brain," Nancy teases. She grabs the salt and passes it to their mother, earning an affectionate *thank you*.

“Mike, listen to your mother. And Nancy, don’t be rude to your brother,” Ted drones, using the authoritarian tone he brings out on the odd occasion he acts like a parent. “I raised both of you better than this.”

I don’t remember you raising us at all, Mike thinks.

“Regardless, I expect everyone to be careful. The news says that the homosexual curse has spread to Hawkins. Goodness, those deviants must have never read Leviticus. God warned them of exactly what would happen, but they didn’t listen. But now they infect pious Hawkins? Maybe now they’ll finally take notice and pick up a Bible, then go to therapy-”

“Ted, maybe we can talk about this another time?” His mother sighs and shoves another piece of meatloaf onto her plate. “Holly’s too young for this.”

“It’s never too early to teach kids how to behave. The presence of even a single homosexual in this town would ruin its dignity...”

“Our new English teacher is gay,” Mike blurts. *Shit. Why did I just say that?*

Ted’s dull glare intensifies, and he stares at Mike like a cop interrogating a criminal. Mike rarely feels much of anything towards his father, save a muted indifference or a repressed rage, but in these rare moments, the man terrifies him as much as the Mind Flayer did.

The hatred, the venom, the apathy, it's all there, channeled on him.

"What did you just say? Are you sure, Michael? This is not something to make light of."

Mike tries to resist his compulsive urge to back off, to pass it off as a joke. For one, Nancy's right there, so he can't weave an elaborate web of lies. The other thought is one of a momentary courage, an impulse to fight back, a desire to rebel. The courage is fleeting, but he takes it:

"Yes. He told us in class." He pauses, then decides to add: "And he's a cool guy. Perfectly normal"

"*Normal?! Michael, those people are sinners. Don't talk to them, teacher or otherwise. I'm disgusted by this. I'll file a complaint with the school tomorrow. Perhaps I should talk to Mr. Sinclair about this; he hates homosexuals as much as I do...*"

"No! You're wrong."

Mike feels his voice dwindle, and it quickly reduces to a whisper. Something brushes against his leg, and Mike turns to see Nancy shaking her head at him. She mouths a *'knock it off'* to him, and his heart desperately wants to listen. His mouth, however, has a mind of its own:

"Mr. Benson is--"

“ENOUGH,” Ted booms, and Mike’s ears ring from cutlery slamming against the table. Ted stands up, and screams directly at Mike: “Tolerating or supporting homosexuals is no better than being one. I will not have such *deviant* behaviour in my house. This is your only warning, son. You are to behave yourself, or there will be consequences. Talking back to your father like this is unacceptable. Do you understand?”

Mike snuffles a bit, but he holds the tears back and chokes out a *yes*. Holly, however, does not, bursting out into unceremonious, uneven sobs. Nancy quickly moves to pick up her sister, and rocks her back and forth like a baby, sending Mike a loaded glance. *Well, that’s just unfair.*

“Well, I hope you’re happy, Ted. You’ve ruined our family dinner,” his mother says.

“It needed to be said. I won’t hear you tell me otherwise, woman.”

“Mike understands what he said was wrong. You didn’t need to scare Holly.”

Karen’s voice raises at her daughter’s name, and Mike slowly pushes his seat back, readying himself for a quick escape. Nancy appears to do the same. It’s not a new song and dance. He’s been through the motions before; his father will say something provocative, and his mother will retort where she doesn’t need to. He readies himself for a long evening.

“Don’t lecture me on how to raise our kids. Just shut up and eat your dinner.”

“Absolutely not. I’m not about to have four children in this house-”

“I don’t come home from work just to-”

“You and your ridiculous needs-”

Mike catches Nancy leaving the room, Holly in tow, and he thanks her for getting his little sister away from this toxic mess. Frankly, no amount of meatloaf is going to keep him here to witness his parents barking at each other like petulant preschoolers. He stands up, foot thumping against the floor just a *bit* too hard, and for a moment both of his parents are looking at him. He doesn’t stay long enough to hear what they say.

His backpack is off to the corner, by the doorway, and Mike grabs it in a rush as he stumbles out of the house to his bike. *Anywhere’s better than here. Need to think. Need to breathe.*

“Mike! Wait!”

Nancy jogs over to him, huffing a bit. Mike looks his sister over, and he notes her half-brushed hair, hurriedly packed in clumps behind her ears. Bags accent her eyes, and she looks about ready to fall over. Even so, her gaze is fiery, unyielding to even her own exhaustion. It’s always been something he’s admired... or hated.

“Mike, listen. What mom and dad said was wrong, and I want you to know that.”

He gives a strained laugh. “I already know. I’m the one who said it.”

Nancy nods. She gives him a grave look, and he’s not sure how to respond. A leaf rustles in the background, tumbling across their yard in the late summer night. The atmosphere is far too macabre for his liking. Well, nothing to do but say something; the silence is choking him.

“What is it?”

“Mr. Benson. I’m not sure what he said to you, but he can’t be trusted. He’s up to something. I just know it.”

Not *again*.

“Damn it Nancy, your stupid conspiracy theories were fun when we were kids, but you need to grow up already. Just because he dresses weird doesn’t mean he’s out to get us.”

Nancy rubs her temple and sighs. “No, it’s not that. Just hear me out-”

“Prove it.”

“What?”

“Tell me how you know he’s suspicious.”

“I-” she goes silent for a moment, as if thinking over her next move.
“I just have a feeling. That’s all.”

So she’s like the rest of them. Lucas also just *has a feeling*, after all. Mike bites his lip and turns around, pedalling away and ignoring Nancy’s pleas as they recede into the distance. He’s not sure where to go, so he lets his feet guide him as he sits on his bike, thinking - well, moping. He only manages to temper his frustration when he finds himself steering towards a seedy area of town, a bit past where Will’s house is. His father *hates* that area, labelling it a haven of addicts and perverts. He’s tempted to go out of spite, but his disruptive sense of self-preservation stops him.

A few minutes later, he’s lying on a grassy hill by the Quarry, propping up his backpack as a pillow. The sky is dark and gloomy tonight, with few stars illuminating the heavens. Perhaps it’s an omen of sorts, a divine punishment for a cursed, diseased town. *They’ll probably use AIDS as an excuse to get rid of Mr. Benson. Fuck. I need to talk to him again. I need information.*

He hears the sound of wheels scraping against the dirt trail, and he jolts up to see a shadowy figure near the trees where his bike is parked. His hands start to shake, and he instinctively takes a step back. Who would come to the Quarry at this hour when half the town

is on self-imposed quarantine?

The figure approaches, and Mike relaxes when it steps into the moonlight. It's a girl wearing a sweater and shorts, though her face is half-covered by a scarf she wears around her head. He doesn't recognize her until he hears her voice:

"Oh, I know you. Mike, right? You're one of dingus's friends."

"Robin! Uh, hey," he says shyly.

She walks over to him after withdrawing a pink blanket from her bike. She spreads it across the hill, and beckons for Mike to join her.

"I take it you had an argument too? That's usually when I come here," she says.

"Yeah."

She doesn't push further. Instead, she yawns and flops down onto the soft fabric. Mike looks up at the sky again. Still only fifteen stars up there. But it's fifteen times better than the alternative. At least there's *something* bright to light up his world. Mike runs his hands across the grass, indulging himself in the coolness of the dewy blades. Both of them sit in silence, but it's nothing like the silence with Nancy. Robin's just *here*. If anything, he's the one intruding.

“You know, I have a gay English teacher,” he says. It feels strangely liberating to say.

Robin’s eyes budge open, and her lips curl into an O. “Yeah, I’ve heard. Dingus mentioned it to me. But I’m surprised. Never thought I’d see other gay people in Hawkins.”

Mike keeps his gaze focused on the stars. “Other? What do you mean?”

“Erm, w-well, I have gay friends.” Her stutter doesn’t go unnoticed, but he decides to not say anything.

“Ah. Well, he’s cool?”

“Yeah. He is. Say, why isn’t Will with you? The Byers kid?”

Will? Why would she ask about... “He’s at home. Doesn’t know about this.”

“Ah. He’s a fascinating kid, that Will. I can see why you’re so attached to him. Attracted, even, like a bee to honey.”

What was *that* supposed to mean? Nerves cluster in his hands, and he feels himself go numb for a moment. Robin seems so friendly, but there’s a dangerous sageliness in her voice, as though she’s asserting a fact about him that he doesn’t even know. He replays the comment

in his head, twice, thrice, four times over. Each time it has a different meaning, and he has a perpetual headache over it.

After no deliberation whatsoever, he blurts: “Duh. He’s my best friend. Of course I like him.”

Robin laughs giddily at that. “Of course, who wouldn’t like a polite, gentle, sensitive boy like him? Almost reminds you a bit of a girl.”

Damn it, Robin. Don’t remind me of that El thing. I still don’t know what to think about that.

“W-will’s a boy.”

“Oh, I know. And he’s a high school boy now. Just about time for a pretty girl to swoop in and steal him, don’t you think?”

The thought of Will spending all his time with some chick is... deeply disturbing. He’s already had enough dreams about Will and El dating - that’s a nightmare situation - but some random girl is hardly better. What about D&D? Or those nights they read comic books instead of sleeping? Would Will just *ignore* him if he started dating someone?

He tries to push the jealousy aside. *It’s just because you don’t have a girlfriend. Be happy for him if he gets one first. Be a good best friend, damn it. Stop being so selfish all the time.*

“H-he’s not... I don’t want... Will’s had a hard life. I want him to be happy.”

Robin smirks. “I think a girlfriend would make him happy, wouldn’t it?”

Mike shakes his head. “It can’t just be anyone. He’s better than that. I don’t think any girl understands Will.” *Or deserves him.*

“Try me. What’s so special about the Byers kid?”

“Well, he’s an awesome artist. His drawings are so much better than pictures from a camera...”

And so, he talks. He tells Robin about the drawings Will has given him over the years. He tells her about Will’s talent for stories and incredible imagination, launching into a small tangent about D&D when she confesses she doesn’t know the game. He tells her about how Will seems reserved, but is really funny when you get to know him. And of course, he tells her how much Will cares about complete strangers, always putting them before himself.

Eventually, Robin cuts him off. “Wow, Wheeler, I didn’t know you had it in you. It’s been what, half an hour, and you’re still going strong. Guess you’re right. Will really doesn’t need a girlfriend. He needs *you*. And you need him. Can I ask you something?”

Half an hour? She listened to him for that long? Well, he might as

well oblige after her patience with him:

“Yeah, sure.”

“Were you arguing about Mr. Benson? With your parents?” Her voice is sharp, cutting, and precise, and Mike curses the lack of ambiguity. He doesn’t bother wondering how she deduced it was his parents. He just spent thirty minutes ruling out the other option.

“Were you?” He looks straight at her, and for a moment, her gaze falters.

“I asked first.”

“Yes. My dad hates gay people.”

“So does mine. Guess we must be long-lost siblings, or something. Explains your penchant for romcoms. Can’t wait to bond over shitty dads, little brother.”

“Uh, yeah. I’m not calling you big sister, though. Nancy’s annoying enough,” he mutters.

“I’ll drink to that. So, are you going back? Like, tonight?”

She snatches Mike's backpack and rests her head on it. Mike rolls his eyes, but doesn't move to retrieve it. Instead, he stares at the sky again. *Weird. There's sixteen stars now.*

"Guess I have to."

Robin yawns. "You mentioned Will lives nearby earlier. Why not just stay the night with him? He'd probably understand if he's half as perfect as you say he is."

Mike feels his cheeks warm at that one. But she's right. He could just call Will and ask him. Beats dealing with his parents and whatever other shit his family has to say.

"Good idea." He grins, then in a flash swipes the backpack from under Robin's head, causing her to bump against the ground with a groan.

"Ow, what the hell, Mike," Robin says.

Mike fumbles through the various worksheets and syllabuses he'll never look at again, throwing paper wads and notebooks onto the grass until he finds his supercomm.

"Sorry, that's what little brothers do," he jokes, before turning the comm to Channel 6, the one he's reserved for privately talking to Will.

“Will, you there? Over.”

A few moments later, a soft voice replies: “I’m here. Over.”

“Can I come over? My parents had a fight and I sorta left the house. Over.”

“Yeah, of course. I’ll tell my mom. Over.”

Mike stuffs his supercomm in his backpack before haphazardly reaching for the papers he’s thrown about everywhere. Robin hands him a few scattered next to her. He gets up to leave, but then turns back to her.

“What are you gonna do?”

“Don’t worry. I’m alright. Good night.” She turns over on her side and closes her eyes.

“Alright. Night.”

Mike hops onto his bike, pedaling towards the Byers house for the second time in twenty-four hours. *Well, that was quite the first day of school. Only two hundred more to go.*

Notes for the Chapter:

Some of you might have noticed that I changed some of the details about the rainbow ship from canon. That's intentional :) Who knows, might see more of it later.

Anyhow, first Mike POV chapter (and not even close to the last)! Hopefully I got him somewhat in character? Will's a lot easier for me to write, but I really do love writing Mike.

If you've enjoyed the story so far and/or have feedback, let me know. I appreciate every comment; knowing that people like the story really motivates me to keep on writing. That's all for now! See you next week :D

-Dan

4. Under the Rainbow

August 26, 1985

If the first day of school is a firestorm, the rest of the week is the smoldering ash left in its wake. The protests continue strong, much to Mike's dismay, but it's less debilitating when there's no fear of humiliating himself next to Will. Ted's promises also come to fruition, with several parents threatening legal action against the school if Mr. Benson is not removed. Nobody ever reports the results, but Mr. Benson remains their teacher. But within a day, Mike strolls into class to find the rainbow flag notably absent. It's probably some settlement because they can't find another English teacher on short notice. *Succeeding an AIDS patient is cursed enough as is* , he thinks. *Everything in this damn town is cursed.*

The whispers in the hallways persist, but nobody hurls explicit remarks in class. The skeptic in him panics, scanning his classmates for signs of another attack, another onslaught, another catastrophe. He keeps a close eye on Will, hanging around him whenever he's near his locker or in a crowded hall, but nobody makes any moves. The halls grow quiet and dim until the only thing he hears is the chattering of his teeth. Whispers become stares, and after an eternity passes, the stares fade into nothing. By the end of the week, the students have turned their attention to Homecoming. Like that's any better.

One event in particular sticks out in Mike's mind as he and Will walk to lunch. There's another crowd gathered around the lockers, but it doesn't seem ready to disperse. And it's cheering.

Will sighs. "Another Homecoming proposal? Third one this morning."

A boy in front of them whistles. “Whoa, he scored *Caroline* ? Lucky bastard. Her boobs are huge.”

Another one nudges the first boy in the arm. “She’s popular too. Like she’s in the top ten hottest girls in the school for sure.”

“Damn straight.”

A tender feeling tugs at Mike’s heart, and he can’t quite identify it. It’s something like longing, like he’s looking at a nice shirt that’s out of his budget. The feeling travels up his spine and through his body, and it’s accompanied by a pang of loneliness.

The crowd clears slightly, and he sees a tall, handsome boy on his knees, looking up at a blushing girl. It’s the same cliché he’s seen in those romcoms women love, thousands of times before. And yet, the scene feels so *distant* to him, so weirdly foreign. He tries to picture himself doing this with El, but nothing happens; his mind shakes off the image as if rejecting it. *God, I’m so fucked. What the hell is wrong with me?*

He tugs at Will’s sleeve, though the action is unnecessary since Will is gazing at him, green eyes filled with worry. “Will. Let’s go to lunch.”

Will quietly nods, and neither boy mentions it again.

The Party is quick to break the unspoken tension, however, as everyone launches into talking about what clubs they've joined. Within minutes, the table devolves into a mess of schedules and snark and sadness once they realize how they have nearly no time to hang out after school. They're all growing up, he realizes, and soon they'll be adults; separate lives, separate spouses, and no time for freedom or fun. Days of not seeing each other will soon become weeks, then months, and maybe even years. The thought of not seeing his best friends, of not seeing *Will* , for years...

Max tells them about joining the track team, something about wanting to "show up stupid boys," a comment that earns her several deadpan looks and a sarcastic glare from Will. Lucas and Dustin have both joined the AV Club, entering some state-wide science competition. Mike thinks back to the yearly science fairs the four of them would dominate, and it's a bittersweet memory; things haven't been the same since Will was kidnapped. Every time they talk about science, there's always a slight remorse, a hesitation in the air that they try to stifle. But the memories of Hawkins Lab remain embedded in their hearts, hot and searing like burn marks.

Will, to nobody's surprise, has joined the art club. Mike's been thinking of buying a second binder for more of Will's drawings, and Max jokes about it being a marriage scrapbook. As if.

But when his friends turn to him, he doesn't have a club. Well, there's one in mind, namely because there's a poster for it in their English classroom. He's still not sure, though. He's a *guy* . Signing up for it is like putting himself on a bullying shortlist.

"So?" Max prompts, "Any clubs in mind, Wheeler?"

“Well... I thought maybe the drama club?”

Max snorts. Dustin laughs. Lucas gives him another stare. Will smiles at him.

“Don’t be mean, guys,” Will says. “I think it’s a great idea. You’re a great dungeon master, Mike. Drama club has stories too, I guess? I dunno, I think you’d be good at this.”

“Thanks, Will. See, at least *someone* supports me,” he says, side-eyeing the others on the word *someone* .

“You’re enough of a drama queen as is, Mike,” Dustin says. “And drama club *is* kind of gay. Besides, since when do you sing?”

“True,” Lucas says. “I’ve never heard you sing. Bet you can’t top my epic duets with Max.” Max wraps her arm around Lucas at that and smirks at Mike.

“H-he can sing.”

Will is so quiet that Mike can barely hear him. His face is bright red, and Mike knows exactly why. He’s probably no less red.

Dustin looks amused. “Oh? Do tell.”

“No thanks. Ask Mike.”

“You’re no fun, Byers. Fine.” He looks to Mike expectantly, but Mike doesn’t budge.

“Nope, nope, not going there. Besides, I’m not signing up to act. I’m signing up to *write the music* . We’re doing an original play this year.”

Lucas perks up at that. “Wait, really? That’s actually cool.”

Max nods in agreement. “I didn’t realize you write songs either. You should write the Party a cool anthem. Like a war march or something.”

“Maybe I will,” he teases, and everyone bursts into another conversation.

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Every day, he looks forward to English class just a bit more. It’s always been his favourite class; Mike loves reading and writing, frequently weaving together bits and pieces of fantasy novels into his elaborate Dungeons and Dragons campaigns. They’re also doing a unit on “the classics,” as Mr. Benson calls it, and reading the *Iliad* has been really cool.

Will also enjoys it, which really helps. Mike occasionally... well,

constantly, finds himself not paying attention and instead watches Will drawing sketches of Greek figures. There's this one drawing of Achilles that is *really* incredible; the man's armour accentuates his broad, muscular body, and he bears a bronze spear that threatens all who cross him. Mike, of course, admires the muscle-god drawing from a purely artistic perspective. It's amazing that Will's art has the power to make his face flush like that from its stunning realism. He never stops to think about how Will hasn't drawn any women.

There's also the post-class chats with Mr. Benson, which Will has started tagging along for. He asks about his short stories and his music and life in New York, and Mr. Benson chats away while he and Will listen. The man never mentions his gayness again, however; when Mike hints at it, he simply says that he's not allowed to bring it up. *Classic Hawkins*, he thinks, *keeping me from the information I want. Gay people can fall in love. Why can't I picture it? It doesn't fit. It's not right.*

This time, however, Mr. Benson stops Mike after class, with a certain glint in his eyes that tells Mike he means business.

"Mike, could you wait a moment? I need to speak to you about your writing assignment," Mr. Benson says.

Mike looks over to Will, who seems to get the hint. "I'll save a seat," his best friend says. "Try not to take all lunch this time."

Mike nods. "Thanks, Will. I'll be quick, promise."

He trots over to Mr. Benson's desk, sitting on a chair that the man has

pulled over. Mr. Benson stretches, before leaning back into his chair. He's dressed in a formal shirt and black slacks - likely another casualty of Hawkins parents - but there's still a mysterious draw to his look, a weird quirk that accentuates his demeanor. His voice still has that elevated pitch, and his movements are still unusually slender for a man. And that earring, that ruby red earring, is still there. Mike doubts that any parent *could* wrestle it off him.

"So, my writing assignment?" He asks.

"It was extremely well written, like an actual passage from the poem. The words were almost lyrical in nature, which makes me think you would be a good fit for the drama club. Have you thought about it, by chance?"

"Yeah," he says, not making an effort to hide his misgivings. "But I'm not really sure. If I did it, well, it might mean more bullying..."

Mr. Benson gives him an owlish look, as though he doesn't really believe him. He probably doesn't.

"Have you ever cared about that? I thought you had thicker skin."

A fire sparks in his chest at that one. *Of course* he has thick skin. He's dealt with bullies his whole life, for Christ's sake. Only Will and Lucas have been slurred at more than him. For a second, he nearly forgets he's speaking to a teacher, and he only barely controls the defensive reply:

“Of course I fu- uh, hecking do!”

Mr. Benson snorts. He flips through a stack of papers until he withdraws a sheet from the center of the pile. Mike recognizes his half-legible, blocky handwriting, along with a red ‘A+’ stamped on the paper. Mr. Benson pushes the paper to him.

“You have talent, kid. Use it. Drama club is a great chance for people like you to be yourself. You can write what you actually feel. This paper was great, but I’ve been an English teacher for fifteen years, Mike. You can’t fool me. I know you’re holding something back.”

He pauses, and Mike looks him in the eye. They hold a glance for a few moments, until Mr. Benson shies away. Mike feels a strange sense of victory at that. But even if he won a battle, he’s losing the war.

“But I don’t know *what* I’m holding back,” he admits. “I don’t get it. I’m confused. I don’t think writing music would help with that.”

“I’m no life counsellor, nor is it appropriate for me to help students with personal issues,” Mr. Benson says. “But you have an imaginative mind, and it would be a damn shame for it to rot. So I’ll suggest one thing. There’s a book I read as a boy that helped me figure things out. I wrote a book report about it, in fact.”

The smirk on his face is the same from when Mike admitted to being curious about his gayness. Upon seeing that look, Mike perks up. *What is he trying to tell me? Is this a trap of some sort? No, it’s a signal. A book... a self-help book, like the ones Mom sneaks into her room when she thinks we’re not looking? Or is it something else?*

He inhales, then smirks back at Mr. Benson. Two can *definitely* play at that game.

“What kind of book is it? Hopefully not the Bible, because we have plenty of those at home.”

“Goodness, no,” Mr. Benson says, and the look of horror on his face is just too funny for Mike not to burst into laughter. Once he recovers, Mr. Benson finishes: “It’s called *Under the Rainbow*. ”

Oh. Mike’s not stupid enough to miss the implication. But at the same time, he’s awed by his teacher’s underhandedness. Understanding flashes through him. He’s as pissed about not getting to talk about his lifestyle as I am. But getting me a book to give me the information? I underestimated you, Benson. Wait, but does that mean he thinks I’m confused about my-

“Alright. Well, I have to go eat lunch. Will’s waiting for me. Thanks, by the way.”

“Not a problem. And about the drama club... consider it, Mike. I think it would be good for you.”

Consider it considered. Mike withdraws a pencil from his backpack, and as he walks to the door, he discreetly scribbles his name on the drama club sign up sheet. It’s not until he’s halfway down the hallway that he realizes that Mr. Benson never mentioned the name of the author.

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As he grabs his notebooks for the weekend from his locker, he feels the familiar touch of Will's fingers on his shoulder blades. Will meekly looks up at him, then pulls out a piece of paper from his pocket.

"Mr. Benson gave me my assignment back. But I got a C," he says, sighing.

Mike frowns. Will has never been hyper focused on academics, but he's not one to take failure well either. It's always something about how he's *just not good enough* or that he'll *just have to try harder* as though he spends his time lazing around. Will admitted to Mike about a year ago that he wishes he could go to college, but can't because of those "stupid bills we can never pay." A scholarship is more than a luxury; it's the small sliver of opportunity Will needs, and with every self-sabotage it recedes further away from him.

"Don't beat yourself up over it," Mike says.

"Easy for you to say," Will mutters, and Mike throws his arm around his best friend's shoulder. The boy blushes slightly, and there's a subtle air of awkwardness in the contact.

"I mean it. Who cares if I'm good at writing? You're better at all the things that count, and if Mr. Benson doesn't realize that, well screw him."

Will smiles a bit, and Mike continues before he can deny anything, “and besides, a picture’s worth a thousand words, right? Well, that saying is bullshit. Because your drawings are worth ten million, maybe more. Show him that Achilles drawing and he’ll give you an A-plus-plus.”

“That’s not a thing,” Will says, laughing.

“Not with that attitude. Come on, I saw how sexy you made him,” Mike teases. “Mr. Benson’s gonna be real bothered over that one.”

If Will was blushing earlier, his face is now redder than the A+ on Mike’s paper. Mike, feeling generous, decides to spare him further humiliation:

“If you want, you can have my paper. Might help for next time.” He pulls out the paper he stuffed in his jean pocket, and it’s half crumpled and torn at the edges.

Will takes it from him and opens it up. He scans over the words with curiosity, before turning the page over to face Mike.

“Why’d he mark this part in red?”

“Uh, I dunno. I didn’t really look at it. What part is it?”

“I’ll just read it, I guess.” Will clears his throat dramatically, and

Mike giggles. “ *As a star in the morning, lightened by Dawn’s rose-tipped fingers, shines ever brightly, so did Achilles glow in his eternal glory, impervious to all but Patroclus’s affection.* ”

Oh. That little bit. Mike had just written it on an impulse, not bothering to think about what it meant. The words just flowed onto the page, and his hand had submitted to his mind’s whimsies. And proofreading is overrated anyways. But now, thinking about it, the verse *did* seem a bit out of place. No wonder Mr. Benson made a note of it. Just bad writing. Embarrassing too.

“Mike, this is...” Will stops.

“On second thought, I’ll keep that,” he says, and without wasting another breath, he snatches the crumpled sheet from Will, his arms reaching out sloppily to take it.

“I didn’t mean that. I liked it, actually. A lot.”

“You did?”

“Yeah. Of course I did.”

“Ah,” Mike says, and he shifts about bashfully. “I-I should probably get going. Have to go to the library.”

Will gives him a curious look, and Mike adds, “It’s for my mom. She,

uh, wants me to pick up a book. She's super busy with mom stuff. And she wants the book today because she's really into that stuff. You know, those stupid romcoms girls like." *Great job Mike, there's only a ninety percent chance Will can tell you're lying.*

Luckily, Will doesn't say anything about it.

"Romcoms? Must run in the family," Will teases.

"Shut up."

"Have fun! And if you find any adult novels-

Mike doesn't let him finish and walks away quickly, face burning from what he prays is the *utterly insane* heat of late summer Hawkins.

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Hawkins Public Library is surprisingly less ramshackle and beat down than one would expect. In a way, it's actually rather homely. Unlike those libraries Mike sees in movies, this one isn't stringently organized. There's a few shelves lining the walls, but they adorn the back and side of the building, and the space feels open rather than segmented. Children play in a small strip sectioned off to the side, amusing themselves with puzzles and action figures, ignoring the world around them until a parent shushes them for not using their indoors voice. It's rather cute. *Holly would probably love it here, if Mom would ever let her go out on her own.*

Now, how to find this book? He can't just *ask* ; Mr. Benson wasn't direct, but Mike knows there's something about this book that's not quite normal. It's a Pandora's Jar he isn't quite ready to open. He looks over to the librarian at the desk; she's an oddly imposing woman, tall and brutish, with short brown hair and thick glasses. She reminds him *far* too much of his kindergarten teacher, who felt more like a prison guard than a guardian. Maybe Librarian-Brutus and Donkey Face are distant relatives. Either way, he's not about to ask *her* anything.

Half an hour later, he's sorted through books of every type and shape - fiction and nonfiction, long and short, romances, comedies, mysteries, adventure stories, and even adult books. Of course, finding a title without an author is like finding friends in a crowded movie theater. He's about to head home when he hears a soft voice directly behind him:

"Dear, are you looking for something? Can I help you?"

He turns to see an elderly woman, no younger than sixty, smiling brightly at him. She wears a wrinkled sundress, a patterned blue one with sunflowers and daisies. Her eyes are a radiant amber, starkly contrasting her pale complexion. She holds a book in her arm, and she sags slightly from the weight. Something about her smile is so *familiar* , but Mike can't quite remember where he's seen it.

"I'm ok. Just looking for a book, but I can find it," Mike says. "Did you need any help? That book looks heavy."

"That would be appreciated, dear. Could you put this on the shelf

behind you? Top row, please.”

He grabs the book, and notices that it’s an anthology of short stories. There’s a lot of authors he doesn’t recognize. Oscar Wilde? Virginia Woolf?

“What book are you looking for?” She looks over curiously while he glances at the anthology. “I’m a librarian here. I can help you find it.”

It’s at that moment that he recognizes the grin. It’s his *mother’s* grin, back when he and Nancy were kids and everything was simple. It’s a smile long surrendered to the banalities of domestic life, a shelved memory from a simpler time, before interdimensional beasts and homecoming dances. It’s a smile he would see when she made lasagna for dinner and he hugged her and called her the best mom ever. It’s a smile of a woman who has long since hollowed out, who has less energy on her best days than this elderly librarian does on her worst.

Mike can resist many things, but nostalgia is not one of them.

“M-my English teacher told me to find it,” he says, and then lowers his voice to a whisper. “It’s called *Under the Rainbow* .”

He regrets saying it immediately.

“Oh, that’s...” something flashes in the woman’s eye, but he has no idea what. “Yes, I know exactly where it is. Come with me, dear.”

She walks slowly, a slight limp in her step, and Mike patiently walks in her shadow, not daring to say a word. Panic and curiosity both cloud his mind, and nerves clump in his stomach. A few minutes of awkward silence pass as the two cross to the back until they arrive at a dusty corner on the side. Mike glances at the side of the bookshelf and notices that it has no label written on it. Clearly, it's not commonly frequented. The woman limps over to the shelf, pushes a few books around, and withdraws a small paperback.

"Here you are," she says, placing it gently in his arms like a glass jewel.

The book is dusty, and the binding is half-decomposed, but there's no doubt it's what Mr. Benson recommended. Mike notices two figures on the cover. The first is a young prince, clad in a silk tunic and bearing an oaken scepter. At his knees is a young knight - a squire, from the looks of it - and the knight looks fondly at his liege. Mike pushes away the urge to compare it to the look Achilles has in Will's drawings. Directly above both men is a rainbow, half-hidden amidst a sea of clouds. Well, at least the title wasn't lying. Oddly, there isn't an author anywhere on the front cover. *Wait, nobody wrote this book? Or is the author anonymous? If the book is hidden back here, barely in any shape, and the author didn't reveal himself, then something is clearly up here. What the hell is he making me read?*

The librarian appears to notice his confusion, and she gently brushes some dust off the book's cover.

"It's an old book, and the author is contested," she says, sitting on a nearby wooden chair. "What brings you to this section, child?"

“This section?”

“Yes. This is the ‘queer literature’ section.”

Thought so. “O-oh, ok. So this is a book about... g-gay people?”

“Indeed. This is probably the gayest place in Hawkins,” she says, giving a hearty laugh. “I’ve read most of this shelf. Used to come here with my partner all the time.”

Her eyes glimmer a bit, wettening slightly, and Mike connects the dots. Well, that’s tragic. But *partner* ? Like a friend? Or a different kind of partner, like a husband? He tries to find reason in her vagueness, but draws a blank.

“Actually, this book was her favourite. We would sit together and read it aloud every evening.”

Oh. OH. Mike jolts a bit at that, and he looks at the librarian again. Her face is composed again, and that soothing smile is back. This time, he smiles back.

“So you’re... gay?” He spits out the last word.

“No, actually, I’m Linda the Librarian first and foremost,” she says, chuckling under her breath. “But my partner was a woman. The most beautiful woman in the world at that. So I suppose that’s a yes.”

"I'm Mike," he says, and there's an urge to add something else, but he doesn't know what. "Sorry about your partner," he finally spits out.

"It's alright, dear. She lived a happy life. But sometimes the world isn't fair for people like us. Oh, poor Keegan Gray. Such a good man, so young..."

Us? Who does she mean by us? Her and her partner, right? Or does she mean... no. No, no she doesn't. Stop thinking like that, Mike. There's nothing wrong with you. Nothing at all, damn you. Mr. Benson's just putting stupid shit in your head, and you're gobbling it up. No, don't trust him. Don't trust Linda either. Listen to your father-

His mouth, of course, betrays him.

"Why are you telling me all this?"

Linda seems taken aback by that. She scratches at her graying hair, before looking back at Mike. Yet again, her amber eyes meet his brown ones, but unlike Mr. Benson, she doesn't back down.

"I suppose you reminded me of a little girl I used to know. She came to this very library, many years before you were born. She loved to explore, and within an hour she had visited every corner of the building. And then a book caught her eye, and she fell in love right from the cover. That book is long gone, but the memories she made never died."

Mike breaks eye contact. *I was never going to win this war, was I?*

“That book had a beautiful queen, and she was enamoured with this lovely nymph the moment she opened her eyes. I think the girl opened her eyes at the same time the queen did. Life became very different for her on that day. Maybe your life will be the same, Mike. Maybe it won’t. But if a kindred spirit wants my help, how could I refuse?”

Kindred spir it. He’s instantly reminded of Robin, and he makes a note to drop by Family Video soon.

“That’s why I told you. I should get back to the front desk,” Linda says. “But if you ever need recommendations, I’m here every day.”

She gets up slowly, and Mike helps steady her when she almost loses balance. As she walks away, Mike can’t help but think of an old phrase of Ted’s. *Homosexuals are nasty and cunning? Really, dad? Linda wouldn’t hurt a fucking fly.*

He takes Linda’s place in the chair and quickly scans his surroundings. Once he ensures that nobody is there, he opens his backpack and holds the book open above the open space, its back covered by the strapped backside of his backpack. It’s an awkward configuration, but the extra security never hurts.

This better be a damn good story , he thinks, ignoring the fact that he’s never been so eager to open a book before.

Notes for the Chapter:

Aww Mike, stop confusing yourself like that! But yeah, it turns out that there's more gay people in Hawkins than one would think. Also, I couldn't help but sneak in a bunch of Greek mythology references in this chapter because I love it and I'm also re-reading the Iliad for a classics course :) Don't worry, Mike, we've all got the hots for Achilles haha.

As always, comments and concrit are welcome (and encouraged because i love them). Thanks again for reading, and see you next week! Super excited to write the next chapter because it's one of my favorites.

-Dan

5. To Be a Winner

August 28, 1985

Some mornings, when Will's eyes roll open in frustration, all he sees is grayness. The colour of the world has drained away, as has his desire to find it. Simple tasks feel Herculean, and his frustration mounts every time he drops his toothbrush or trips over a shirt on his floor. But then the frustration fades too because being mad requires *energy*, and his quota is expended by getting out of bed. It's too much effort to feel, so he just stands there, his mind feebly sorting through scattered thoughts.

If anything, his family aggravates things. They mean well, they really do, but it always makes him feel even more worthless. It's no reassurance when Joyce becomes a doting mother hen as soon as he frowns, constantly asking if things are *ok* as if she doesn't already have her answer. Then she asks about his antidepressants, which starts his cycle of guilt over their expenses. Oh well. At least guilt is an emotion. At least it's not complete emptiness.

Jonathan, on the other hand, says nothing, as though he skates on charcoal by merely talking to Will. It's the reaction Max or Lucas or Dustin would give him; keeping distance, minimizing interaction, and trying not to set him off. They act like he's china. And he's lonely enough; who needs *more* whispers and mumbles, sneaking about and dancing around his ears, but never giving him the pleasure of hearing them.

It's one of *those* mornings when he sits emotionlessly in art class, idly doodling something without paying attention. Knowing him, it's likely either a landscape, a D&D character, or Mike's face. But when

his art teacher gasps behind him, he looks at his page and sees something completely different.

It's the insect from his dreams, that four-eyed, spiky demon with ruby red eyes and menacing claws. The creature's mouth is wide-open, and it's expression is fierce, bloodthirsty even. Above it is an animated shadow, with tentacles protruding out from a central segment. It's a shape Will could recognize any time, given its recurrence in his nightmares. *I drew the Mind Flayer again? Oh no, has He... no, I don't think so. But then, how did I draw that without even noticing?*

His art teacher seems to have recovered, because she quickly instructs the class to stop staring - as if that'll work - and then puts a reassuring hand on his back.

"Will, dear, are you ok? This drawing is... well, it's terrifying. You should really work on your portfolio, or you'll fall behind." She starts to walk away, but then turns around and says, "and if you need to step out for a minute, you can do so."

He's about to decline, insisting that no, he's normal and fine and ok, but then he looks at the rest of the class. Some of them sneak glances at him, while others don't attempt to hide those looks of derision. And in that moment, Will feels less normal than ever. Not to mention unwelcome. So he takes the offer and rushes out the door without another word. A voice in his head fills the void:

Will, you moron. Can't you just go one day without making a fool of yourself and all of your friends? Mike must be embarrassed to be friends with you. Not that he even knows who you truly are - all you'll ever be is inferior. Mike will have everything: love, money, and girls. All you'll ever get is hatred, poverty, and... not girls.

He feels a light tap on his shoulder, a gentle one that's more reminiscent of his mom's touch than Mike's. Will turns to see a short girl wearing a blue shirt, pink skirt, and leggings. Streams of blonde hair part along her back. She's wearing a small cap, and Will notes a rainbow badge sewn onto it; he's instantly reminded of the girl he reluctantly danced with at the Snow Ball, one of the most painful nights of his life. It's an outfit he recognizes fairly well: it's *Jennifer Hayes*.

"Um, Will? Are you okay? I saw you storm out of class, and I wanted to check up," she says, her voice soft and angelic.

"Yeah. I'm fine," he says, and it comes out more curtly than intended.

But Jennifer doesn't flinch. "Oh. Well, uh..." she fidgets with her fingers, "when we get back to class, could I sit with you?"

Huh? Is this some trick?

"S-sure. Why?"

"Do I need a reason? If you really want one, I guess it's because your drawing was really cool." Her face tints slightly red.

Ok, this is *definitely* a trick, he figures. How could anyone find that cool, let alone want to see *more* of it? Will realizes that he never

actually grabbed the drawing, and as if on cue, Jennifer pulls it out from her t-shirt pocket and unfolds it.

“Kinda looks a bit like Jaws, but more buggy,” she says, letting out a girlish giggle. “Scary or not, you’re really talented, Will. I could learn a lot just by watching you.”

“Who sent you?” He blurts it out, and moves to cover his mouth immediately. But her lips curl into a frown, and her gaze shifts to the ground.

“Nobody. If I was trying to fool you, I’d do it a different way. Do you think I’m stupid?”

“N-no, that’s not what I-”

“Then maybe open up a damn bit? I’m trying my best here.” Her tone then softens as she adds, “look, I really don’t mean any harm. Promise.”

That admission makes him swell up with guilt, and he sheepishly looks at Jennifer, wincing at his own behaviour. And then he nods.

“Alright. S-sorry, Jennifer-”

“Jen.”

“Oh. Sorry, Jen. I just didn’t think anyone would want to talk to me after that. Or ever, really. Kind of feels too good to be true.”

“Well, it isn’t.” She sighs, then gives him a toothy smile. “Come on, silly. Let’s get back to class.”

When they return, Will finds Jen’s stuff settled snugly next to his, and it dawns on him that she wasn’t about to accept a *no*. He’s surprisingly reassured by that. Jen sits and begins sketching away at the beginnings of a still-life rose drawing, blissfully ignorant of the stares she’s receiving from the others in the class. *It’s because of me. I dragged her into this. Or maybe she did it out of pity and regrets it.*

But if it bothers her, she certainly doesn’t let it show. She doesn’t move or hesitate or jump up and announce how stupid Will is like he’s expecting her to. No, she’s silent and focused, hands trained on her drawing as she steadily gives it life. Will realizes that she was being *very* humble earlier - that drawing could compete with his best works hands down. The curves of the rose petals are delicate and smooth, without a smudge or a blot that a careless artist might make.

It’s only towards the end of the period that she eases her focused gaze, and her brows unfurl back into a smile. Unlike him, it seems to be her default emotion, and Will feels a tinge of jealousy at that. It’s not fair to judge her for being happy - he *knows* that - but he’s powerless to stop himself.

“Hey,” she starts, voice so soft that he has to lean in to hear better. “Two years ago, when I thought you died, I was really sad.”

Oh. She was sad about that? I didn't know she even cared what happened. Nobody ever told me anything about back then.

But he's not sure how to reply, so he mutters an unsatisfactory *sorry*.

She shakes her head. "Whatever happened wasn't your fault. I wanted to talk to you after that, actually, but I was really scared. Felt like I missed my chance. Guess I just had a moment of courage this morning. Or stupidity, who knows. Who can tell the difference? I just wanted to be friends with you."

Now *Will's* the one smiling, and he extends his hand forward across the table. She opens her own, and he interlaces their fingers, noting the faint flush across her face.

"We already are," he says, before the doubt sinks in again and his voice falters. "But why *me*? You've seen what they say about me."

"Boys suck. You don't. You're actually nice and polite and artsy. People like Troy are pigs. Makes perfect sense to me."

"I mean, if you put it that way..."

"Wanna have lunch with me?"

“What?”

He double takes at that, and she nods as if confirming what she just said. Jen reaches out and places her other hand on their joint ones, and Will looks away bashfully when she smiles at him again.

“Yeah. Sure.”

He’s not sure why it feels like he’s betraying someone.

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They have lunch immediately afterwards, and as Will strolls along to the cafeteria, Jen takes the opportunity to grill him about art. Apparently, she’s a fan of realist art, a preference that seems oddly misaligned with her fondness of Will’s “Jaws-like bug monster.” It’s less of a conversation and more of him listening to an impassioned ramble, but he doesn’t mind. He does the exact same with Mike, after all. Listening is far easier than talking; not like he has anything interesting to say.

But once in the cafeteria, Will feels the familiar touch of Mike’s hand on his shoulder, and he turns to see his best friend wearing a perplexed grin. But it’s not focused on him. Mike’s looking *directly* at Jen.

“Hey Will. Hi, Jennifer Hayes,” he says, and the words are awkward and strained. “Will, you coming for lunch?”

Mike gives him an expectant look, though it feels like a glare. *Shit, he's pissed. Maybe I should tell Jen another time.*

Yet again, his mouth decides to do the opposite: "Sorry, Jen actually wanted to eat with me today. Sorry."

Mike reels at the nickname, and the look on his face is a mixture of shock, confusion, and... annoyance? Suddenly, a pit starts to form in Will's stomach, and it slowly churns as he begins putting puzzle pieces together. The sense of *déjà vu* is overwhelmingly familiar - and nauseating. Will breathes in deeply, trying to push away the inevitable conclusion in a single breath, but it resists his efforts to ignore it, persistent in its horrifying nature.

He *likes* her. Mike *likes* Jen. And Will's in the way. *Well, shit.*

It's not too late to explain. He could always pull Mike aside, tell him it's not what it seems, that they're friends and that he doesn't have a crush - they *just* met. But the look in Mike's eyes has grown emotionless, and Will recoils a bit.

"Yeah. It's alright. I'll talk to you later," Mike says, before walking away.

"Is he ok? D-did I do something?" Jen asks. The poor girl looks flustered, eyes awash with guilt she shouldn't have.

“No, nothing at all,” he reassures, “I’ve never rejected Mike’s lunch offer before, so I think he’s a bit upset. But he’ll be fine. I’ll talk to him later.”

Will’s not at *all* sure about that, but he forces himself to say it. Without another word, Jen leads the two to an empty table, and Will grimaces slightly when he realizes it’s rather close to the Party’s table, meaning that Mike can see everything. Luckily, the cafeteria is too raucous and noisy for him to perceive much beyond that.

Jen withdraws a small blue lunchbox and pulls out a sandwich. She eats slowly while Will stares at his own sandwich, preoccupied with how mad Mike probably is.

“So, Will, do you have a date for Homecoming next week?” Jen looks curiously at him.

“No, I’m still unsure if I’m going.” It’s a lie, of course; he has no plan of going at all.

“Ah,” Jennifer says, sulking slightly. “Well, I was looking for a date and-”

“How about Mike?”

He blurts it out so suddenly that he’s suddenly mortified at himself.

But he's too late. So he just starts talking, hoping that *something* he says will let him retrace those steps. Jen just has an amused smirk on her face, as if Will's squirming is high entertainment.

"You know... Mike's really nice. And smart, and kind. Passionate too. He really cares about his friends, like a lot. He's always really gentle with me when I'm sad and stuff. Plus, he's really funny. Sometimes he does impressions of people and I can never stop laughing because his fake Russian accent is so bad. He's probably a good kisser too. Uh, not that I know, I'm just guessing because he had a girlfriend and-"

Will, what the hell.

"Damn. Sounds like he should be *your* Homecoming date," Jen teases, but when he reels at the remark, she hastily adds, "kidding, kidding. Mike seems like a great guy. That said, I actually wanted to ask someone else to the dance. There's another boy who's very sweet and kind, someone who I just want to see smiling a bit more, you know?"

He knows who she means, but a part of him can't believe it. He's *Will Byers*. He's not an academic superstar who can solve equations in his sleep. He's not a star quarterback with a twelve-pack and enormous muscles. He's not a talented musician with a voice sweeter than the Muses. No, there's nothing here but a plain boy who likes drawing and hates nothing more than himself for being scrawny and needing Mike to look after him.

So he has to say no. He likes Jen - if it's even possible to *not* like her - but there's no wedding bells ringing in his head, or little angels whispering *you're in love* in his ear. Maybe he's just naive, a late bloomer whose romanticism outstrips his rationality. Or maybe he'll never love anyone. There's a spark in front of him, ready to ignite

into a glorious blaze, but Will is damp wood, forever impotent, destined to watch the ember die in front of him.

“So, uh, Will, I think you know which boy I’m referring to. I... I know that we just started talking for real this morning, but damn it, I should have done this two years ago. They say better late than never, but I’m already regretting the wasted time.”

He feels Jen’s arm softly caress his clenched fist, and his hands uncurl upon the contact. She slits her fingers amongst his own once more, and he’s compelled to look up and meet her intense, curious look. *It’s just a ‘no,’ but why is it so hard to say? You’ve said it so many times! But this time you’ll break Jen’s heart. It couldn’t hurt that much to say yes, right? Just a day. It doesn’t have to be more. But still, it doesn’t feel right. I don’t want to do it.*

When he finally looks up, his eyes dart past Jen and look right at Mike, who’s watching the scene unfold without knowing what they’re saying. Eyes linger, and the two boys share a glance, a little glance that lasts seconds.

It’s a glance that changes their relationship forever.

Something dark strikes him in that moment, a feeling akin to bitterness, but with a bit of longing mixed in. He’s no master of recognizing his emotions - his mother’s often complained about that - but he knows this one. He’s felt it so often in his life, whenever he’s seen kids with shiny toys and large homes, or whenever a boy who bullies him happily kisses a pretty girl in the hallways. It’s how he feels when he thinks back to his days in the Upside Down, days of scavenging and fighting for his life while the others played frivolous search-and-rescue games. That feeling, it’s *jealousy*, and poor Mike is

the target.

Mike's always had it easy. El basically came to him. Girls have had crushes on Mike, and even Lucas and Dustin, but nobody ever liked Will. Mike's never had his mom pretend that Santa couldn't come because she couldn't afford Christmas presents. Mike's never gotten bruised by his dad. Nobody spray paints the word 'fairy' on his locker. He always gets to be the hero, saving Will from Demogorgons and Mind Flayers and even himself. It's an eternal constant at this point. Mike's the winner, and he's the loser. A stupid loser.

This is my one chance to be with a girl. My only chance. But I can't hurt Mike like that. He likes her. I can't do it. Fuck. I can't be the winner unless Mike becomes the loser. But there's Jen too. I have to hurt someone, but who? Mike's my best friend... I can't betray him.

The look on his face must be telling, because Jen frowns and withdraws her hand, a dejected frown on her face.

"You don't like me, do you? I get it. I'm sorry; you don't even want to go to Homecoming in the first place. But maybe you should consider it. I know how much you like him."

With those words, his panic instinct flares up, and at once, his decision is made. "No, Jen, I like *you*."

Her eyes grow wide at that, and her face reddens instantly. For the first time that day, her composure vanishes completely. Mouth agape, she barely stutters out a response: "What?"

He takes a deep breath, and wills himself to gather the courage he's never had. It's time to be the winner for once. He gets up, rejoins their hands, and leans in to whisper the words.

"Jennifer Hayes, will you go to Homecoming with me?"

"YES!"

The hug is so quick that he nearly falls over from the momentum. But the second he recovers, he looks behind him to make eye contact with Mike again. The other boy is utterly fligid, and Will prays that Jen was quiet enough for him to not figure out what just happened. That, or maybe he's red from Dustin telling a funny joke? Will's mind immediately rejects the thought, but he's desperate.

Yet thirty seconds later, he still doesn't regret it. And when Jen launches into a speech about coordinating outfits and her grandmother's sense of fashion, he quietly nods along, content.

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After the final bell rings, Will rushes to his bike as fast as possible, sparing no time to talk to the Party or Jen. There's one person he's not exactly in the mood to encounter, so it would be better to leave immediately.

“Hey, Will? Why the rush?” It’s Mike. Just his luck.

“Just need to do some chores,” he lies, and Mike rolls his eyes.

“Well, wait up. I’ll bike you home.”

It’s something that Mike has done for him since he got kidnapped. Every time, without fail, whenever Will bikes home, Mike always accompanies him. He pretends to not need it, but even when it’s not night time, he still appreciates the company. And he can’t help but shiver a little every time he rides by Mirkwood, regardless of the time of day. The fear has become as much a part of him as those monsters did.

Mike hops on his bike, and despite Will’s claim to ‘rush,’ the two take a leisurely pace. When Mike swerves into a nearby wood that Will knows is a longer route, he can’t help but follow. As they bike, Will faintly catches Mike’s voice, muffled slightly by the wind:

“What was that hug about?”

The accusatory tone underscores his word, and the guilt slowly catches up to him. Panic starts to build, and Will is torn between admitting the truth and breaking the thin string of tension that binds them, or lying and keeping up his act.

“Not much. Jen’s just excited about art stuff. It’s nothing you’d find interesting.”

Mike gives him a fake offended look. “Why, *excuse me*, how do you know I’m not a fine arts man? I’ll have you know, I make excellent line drawings.”

Will giggles. “Those are stick figures.”

“I also drew that one great snake-”

“-the one I thought was a horse? Sure, Wheeler, whatever lets you sleep at night.”

Mike smiles, but it’s only momentary. He slows down a bit, and Will tries to match his pace, even if it’ll take until nightfall to get home at this rate. The boys ride in silence, with nothing but the sound of bikes scraping over dirt, squirrels scampering in the wood, and the wind hissing slightly. On any other day, this quiet would be his happy place. But today, the emptiness is stifling, grasping at his throat and blocking him from speaking.

Eventually, he’s had enough, and so he speaks: “Mike?”

The other boy opts to look at the dirt. “What’s up?”

“Are you going with anyone to Homecoming?”

“Course not. I’d tell you first if I was. Besides, I kinda wanted to spend Homecoming night together? Like at my place. Just the two of us. A-and maybe El or Dustin.”

Oh no. Will wonders if Mike’s figured out the truth and is trying to deny it. The look on his face seems closest to denial, though Will can’t figure it out for certain. Mike’s tone is level, almost perfectly practiced to not show any emotion. He’s hiding something for sure; he almost never uses that tone with any of his friends, *especially* with Will.

Guess he has no choice but to rip off the bandage. Will braces himself for the pain: “I... I’m sorry, Mike. There was this....a girl asked me to Homecoming. It was Jen. That’s what the hug was. I’m sorry I lied.”

Will pretends to ignore Mike’s muttering that he *totally called it*. When Mike speaks again, he makes no attempt to hide the hurt in his voice.

“Damn. Uh, congratulations. You finally got a girl!”

Mike adds a fake cheeriness at the end, but Will’s fixated on something entirely different.

“*Finally?*”

“Yeah,” Mike says, confusion lining his face. “Isn’t that what you wanted? Sucks that we won’t have our guys night, but you get to be

happy.”

“Mike, you can be happy too.”

“With what girlfriend?” Mike’s voice rises, though not quite to a shout.

At this, Will stops by a tree at the edge of the wood. Mike hesitates for a moment, then follows suit, parking his bike by a tree. The two stand on a grassy patch where the privacy of the forest meets the open road leading them home.

“You don’t need a girlfriend to be happy,” Will starts, a bit annoyed. “Jen’s not my girlfriend, and I’m happy.” *Well, not really.*

“Good for you. But here I am, the only one at school without a date. Lucas and Max have each other. Dustin’s asking that girl in his Biology class. I had hoped I would at least have someone. But even *you* got a date.”

He should be annoyed at that, but he only feels the surprise. Did Mike just call him a loser? Mike? Of all people? Well, he’s wrong. Will’s the winner this time. *I get to have something one time, and Mike gets mad about it. That’s messed up.*

“Even me, huh? Who are you, Troy? Mike, I thought you of all people would be supportive, but instead you’re getting jealous because of some stupid crush on Jen. I tried to get her to go with you. I tried,

but she didn't want to. Guess I was stupid for thinking that maybe, just maybe, the two of us could both be happy without you getting in the way."

Mike's eyes widen at the word *crush*, and now it's Will's turn to realize that he *totally called it*. He moves himself closer to Mike, voice rising with each word:

"So tell me, Mike Wheeler. What's your problem?"

"My problem is you using Jen to get at me. You've never acted like this much of an asshole before. Don't pretend like you actually like her."

"And if I do?"

"Then I'd be surprised that after fourteen years, you're suddenly into girls all of a sudden. Where'd I miss it?"

He's really going there. The remark is innocent, but the accusation is venomous, and Will's courage shatters as he moves himself backwards, his grip on the ground slipping. Mike's eyes flare with annoyance, but Will responds in turn. The two boys glare at each other, the sweet glances of days past evaporating in the heat of their conflict.

"Watch it, Mike," he growls, but then his voice softens. "I just wanted to be the winner for once."

“So it’s a competition now? What are we competing for, seeing who gets to be a bigger prick? Cuz I’ll let you win if you want.”

“No, it’s not like that. Just... Mike, we’re both guys. Maybe things are just destined to be a competition. Maybe there’s something satisfying about not being in your shadow, to have my own friends who like me for who I am, not just because I’m part of *your* Party.”

Mike looks utterly shocked at that, and his voice reverts to sympathetic at once. He closes the distance between them and wraps his arm around Will’s shoulder. “Will, the others like you for you. It’s not because of me.”

“Lucas is *your* neighbour, and Dustin became friends with you first. El is *your* ex-girlfriend. Without you, I wouldn’t know anyone. They talk to me by association. Mike, I always have lived in the shadows. I think I just wanted to feel the sunlight for once. That’s why I asked Jen.”

“Well, there were other ways to do it than abandoning your best friend and going off with some girl you just met.”

Will wrings himself free from Mike’s arms and reinstates the painful distance between them.

“Look who’s talking!”

“Huh?”

“Did you forget El already? A little too convenient that you did, considering you spent a whole lot of time with her and ignored me. You *dated* her, for goodness sake. How long had you known each other at that point? A week? Sweet, naive El, falling victim to Mike’s plot to ignore his best friend.”

“That wasn’t what I-”

“Save it. In fact, why don’t you just ask El to the dance? You ditched me at the Snow Ball; do it again. You’ve made her so damn obedient to you. I know she’d say yes. Go for it. Have your little dream date, go swap spit with some stupid girl.”

He doesn’t even know what he’s saying now, and he *knows* the comments about El are unwarranted - she’s his second closest friend behind Mike - but the words keep on spilling out. It’s like a door has opened inside his heart, and a demon has retrieved his inner thoughts and feelings, all his hurt and pain and sadness and jealousy.

Mike inhales deeply, and it’s a terrifying sight to watch his face contort slightly, eyebrows furled in deep thought. He’s thinking about something, but what? Will can’t gauge how mad he is, and the lack of control unnerves him. Then, Mike’s head jolts up, and he looks right at Will, his eyes eerily reminiscent of Max during her infamous fits of rage.

“So that’s how it is. It’s all just petty jealousy. You’re blaming me for every problem that you can’t fix. You think you can lie to me, Byers?”

That's cute. I can see right through every smile you've ever faked, and that hasn't changed since this morning. I *know* that you don't like her that way. You're just pretending. That smile you gave her was fake, wasn't it?"

Mike's face is smug, and Will goes on the defensive instantly: "So what if it was?"

"Perhaps you just don't understand girls. They can be difficult to like. For some, even *impossible*."

"M-Mike... what are you saying?"

Mike walks over to Will, painfully slowly, smirk growing bigger with each step. Soon, the two are less than an arm's width apart, but unlike with their usual embraces, Will feels no comfort or security. No, all he feels is pure terror. He shuts his eyes tight, not wanting to look at Mike.

Mike gives a twisted laugh. "I'm *saying* that it's not my fault you don't like girls."

You're not my son. You're a pussy. A fairy who deserves nothing better....

The words barely exit Mike's mouth as Will closes the distance and shoves him to the ground as hard as he can. Mike gasps and lets out a loud grunt as he collapses into the grass, dazed by the impact. Immediately, Will regrets it. In seconds, the look on Mike's face goes

from enraged to surprised to hurt - *as if he has the right to be.*

Mike *knows* how sensitive that topic is, how Will's been harassed, hurt, and abused because of the way he looks or talks or behaves. Mike has always known it, from the first fucking day of kindergarten. Only four people have never crossed the line and insulted him because of *that*: his mom, Jonathan, El, and Mike. But now, he'll have to live with only three people he can trust.

He's not just upset; he's *furious*. Because frankly, all he did was say yes to a stupid Homecoming date. Mike wants to burn their friendship, send their sacred bond to hell... over a girl. *It's literally the thing with El all over again. Ignore me all you want, and it's fine, but I dare to be happy with someone else and you get mad? Screw you, Mike. Screw you.*

Mike's of the same mind, it seems. He gets up, brushes the dirt patches off his jeans, and gives Will another look. This time, it's disappointment he sees in Mike's eyes, mixed with that expression of betrayal he's been using so much recently. Mike doesn't attempt to say anything, instead walking over to his bike without another word. Stupidly, Will walks after him, but the glare he receives freezes him in his tracks.

"Fuck you, Will. I'm done," Mike says, before pedalling into the wood, figure obscuring in the onsetting darkness.

For the first time in two years, Will Byers is left alone in the darkness.

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The door opens with an unceremonious creak, and Will enters the home silently. Joyce is early, for once, slashing wildly at vegetables for some miserable attempt at a salad. She turns to greet her son, and her face instantly grows pale. She moves towards him, ready to say something, but he walks right past her. Coddling is the last thing he can think about.

He walks down the hallway and notices that Jonathan's door is open. He stops by the room and sees his brother knocked out on the bed, exhaustion evident from how he's half slumped with all his clothes still on. Will gently closes the door, sighs, and walks into his own room.

He hurls his bag at his desk, causing art supplies and sketches to clatter to the floor. He jumps slightly at the noise, but quickly ignores it. He then looks over to his desk and sees a photo. It's a picture of him, Mike, Lucas, and Dustin at a science fair, the last one he'd ever win a prize at. A sweet memory, but Will doesn't hesitate in tearing the photo apart, tossing it to the ground like a worn cigarette.

He's screaming now. It's a throaty, primal noise, more monster than man, and he's content to do nothing else. There's a knock on his door - probably his mother begging him to come out - but he's not about to come out. Not now, not ever. Instead, Will stops screaming, flops down onto his bed, and cries.

Notes for the Chapter:

Oh man, that was an intense chapter to write. It was also one of my favorites because I'm a sucker for fights. But I'm also glad to get the main storyline moving! A quick note on Jennifer Hayes: she's a really interesting character because of how she's a

blank slate in canon, so I'm more or less filling in my headcanons for her. She'll be a pretty important character in this fic, so keep an eye out.

As always, let me know what you thought of the chapter! Every comment is appreciated :)

Till next Thursday/Friday!

-Dan

6. The Day We Met

August 29, 1985

He never tells his mother or Jonathan the truth. They pester him relentlessly, asking if he's okay at every waking moment, but he's silent as stone. Eventually, they do figure out that his melancholy has to do with Mike - probably from the sour expression Will has when they mention his name. It doesn't stop the constant check-ins and invasion of his personal space, but it does reduce them once the possibility of something supernatural is eliminated.

School, however, is a trickier situation. The day after 'The Fight,' Will makes no effort to hide his disdain. Glances become glares, and smiles turn sour. The small divide wedging itself between him and Mike grows larger by the minute, transforming first into a hole, then a chasm. When Mike smiles, Will can't feel the warmth any longer; he only sees the twisted counterfeit, that warped smile Mike had before he destroyed their friendship. It's the absence of those little favours they do - holding each other's books, sharing bites of sandwiches, sending secret messages in class - that makes Will realize how much he cherished them.

But it's too late now. The first time he sees Mike, that much is instantly clear. The look Mike gives him is, frankly, *ugly*, a quality Will had thought impossible for the boy. They've fought countless times, over matters both mundane and serious. But this isn't a squabble about whose favourite movie to watch, nor is it a fight over Will's desire to live. It's not a competition with a prize or a trivial conflict of pride. Will knows they both hit under the belt this time, and there's no recovering from that.

The Party figures it out immediately, and within the first half of first period he's received a note from Dustin asking what's wrong, a knowing look from Max, and a whisper from Lucas he pointedly ignores. He *would* say something, but that would require explaining what Mike said - and more importantly, mentioning why he's so upset about it. And that reason isn't something he's willing to think about. Nothing seems to explain why *Mike* is silent and evasive, though. If Will is stoic, Mike is completely unresponsive.

The tension simmers until lunch. The Party tries to dance around the subject, talking about every fun topic under the sun. But then Mike arrives late - probably fresh off bad mouthing Will to Mr. Benson, or something. Mike walks past the vacancy near where Will sits, instead squeezing himself in between Lucas and Max. It's at that point that Dustin loses it:

"Ok, what the *hell* is going on between you two? If you fought, get over yourselves already. None of us can help unless you fucking say something!"

Both Max and Lucas are staring at him (and half the cafeteria); Mike just huffs and scowls at Will. For a moment, nobody says anything, but then Mike picks up his lunchbox and stands up. He makes eye contact with Dustin, then Lucas, and then Max.

"You know Party rules. Will drew first blood, so I'm not saying shit. Or forgiving shit."

"What?!"

“Whoa.”

“Will?”

Will sees the shock on Max’s face, the horror on Dustin’s, and the bitter frown on Lucas’s face, as though Will attacked an innocent kitten. *Damn it, Mike. Sure, tell them all about that but nothing about why I shoved you. Asshole.*

The next thing he knows, Mike has walked off, and Dustin’s aggressive questioning is pointed in his direction.

“Will, what happened? Did you hit Mike? He must have said something really stupid for you to get physical. He can be dense, but it can’t be that bad... right? Right? Say something!”

He sighs and stares at the ground. “Dustin, what happened is between us. But Mike said things I’m never forgiving. We’re not friends anymore.”

Dustin’s face is *devastated* by that, and he rapidly shakes his head as if to deny Will’s words.

“No, tell me that’s bullshit. Tell me you’re joking. Will, without you two there is no Party. You’re like Achilles and Patroclus. Friends to the end. You can’t just ruin everything like that!”

Max pats Dustin lightly on the back, and the boy looks miserably at Will, as though Will betrayed everyone. Max, however, has a glint in her eyes, carefully absorbing his words.

“Something you’re never forgiving?” She pauses for a moment, thinking. “Did he insult your mom or Jonathan?”

“No. Can we please not talk about this?”

“No way, we are *absolutely* talking about this,” Dustin interjects. “Mike has literally saved your life multiple times. I don’t think there’s anything *that* bad he could have said to cause this. You’ve fought before, sure, but it never looked like you were this sick of each other. Don’t be dumb about this, Byers.”

Will stands up and walks away without another word.

That weekend, the Party doesn’t meet for their habitual D&D night for the first time in Will’s recent memory. *It’s the beginning of the end, isn’t it? I messed it all up.*

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September 3rd, 1985

To Will’s surprise, the Party doesn’t abandon him completely. Instead, they fall into the uneasy truce of alternating who they eat

lunch with, like kids floating between the parents of a wrecked marriage. One day he and Jen will be eating lunch alone or with Jen's art friends, and the next day they'll be joined by Max and Dustin. Lucas, however, always sits with Mike. Shocker. It's a new rhythm to adjust to, but Jen certainly doesn't seem to mind.

She asks him about Mike a few times, wondering why Will changed his mind about how perfect he was. Every time, he can only mutter an excuse or a detached *it's personal*. He tries to enjoy his little moments with Jen - the ones he sacrificed everything for - but the memories of what he lost sting too much. Luckily, she's too excited about the Homecoming dance to make note of it. And her enthusiasm is infectious; if he focuses enough on her rambles, he can lose himself in the raw emotion for a few minutes before reality smacks him awake.

Dustin attempts to interrogate him a few more times, and Will grows increasingly guilty with each rejection. Eventually, the other boy seems to give up and looks at Will with a quiet indifference, though he knows that it's just a front. A few of those despondent looks are tempting enough to make him want to talk to Mike - but then he looks away and the bitterness comes rushing back. *If only I could just say something. But then Dustin might just abandon me forever, or worse, join Mike in hating me. God knows Lucas already does.*

He figures that Mike *must* have blabbed something to Lucas, because if the boy was cautious around Will earlier, he's now on high alert whenever he even breathes near him. It's painful to see Lucas accidentally slam into a wall when backing up to avoid proximity with him, or to hear him mutter bitter words under his breath. Will observes him closely, checking for signs of exactly how much he knows, but his friend's poker-face is ironclad.

Is the Party going to disintegrate because of us? Mike hates me, Lucas hates me, Dustin will probably hate me... I guess El doesn't hate me, but would she be friends with me over Mike? And what about Max?

"What about me?" Max's voice is sharp, cutting him out of his thoughts. "You were speaking aloud there."

Damn it, Will. "O-oh, it's nothing. Don't worry."

"You were right to shove Mike, you know."

"What?" He tries to keep his voice even, but it cracks ever-so-slightly.

Max smirks at him, but it's a lighthearted one, far removed from the vicious one Mike gave him. It's reminiscent of the looks *he* would give Mike when they were kids playfully teasing each other on the playground.

"I figured out what's bothering you. And if I'm correct, you were being nice when you shoved him. I'd have beaten that dumbass to a bloody pulp."

"Max! It's still Mike."

"Correction: it's that *Wheeler jerk*. Gah, that guy's so frustrating. Treating you like trash, treating El like trash, being a bitch to me... no clue how you're friends with him."

She paces back and forth, arms crossed, occasionally letting out an angry huff.

“Was friends.” He corrects. “I’m done with him.”

Max rolls her eyes.

“Like hell you are. I’ll give it another week tops before you go back to him. Mike’s an asshole, but he’s also magnetic. For some reason, you and El can’t get enough.”

“Why are you saying all this?”

He can’t tell if she’s trying to reconcile them or just airing dirty laundry. But honestly, he doesn’t mind either way.

“I want you to realize you’re more than what Mike thinks you are. Don’t make the same mistake as El.”

He smiles at that. It’s not a full-blown grin, but he’s still surprised to find himself smiling at all. It’s a smile of relief, the result of knowing that no matter what, he won’t be alone. Will slowly nods, and Max returns the smile.

“Thanks, Max. I’ll keep it in mind.”

“Anytime, Byers. And don’t worry, El and I won’t abandon you.”

She gives him a subtle wink, and then she’s off, skateboarding into the pale evening.

= = =

Will wakes up to the sound of a door roughly thudding against the wall, coupled with angry shouting. He lies in bed, listening to the war of voices, paralyzed. He wants to get up, but a man’s voice freezes him in place. It’s rough and hoarse and *far* too reminiscent of his father’s voice. But when he hears the shattering of glass and the front door slamming, he springs to action.

“Mom?!”

He runs into the kitchen, where his mother is holding a broom, aggressively sweeping at shards of broken china. Will moves to grab the broom, but right before he touches it, his hand becomes transparent, passing right through. *What? What just-*

“Mommy?”

The voice is a soft whimper from behind him, and when he turns around, he sees a tiny five year-old boy with a chestnut coloured bowl cut waddling over towards Joyce.

“Stop, Willie!”

His mom’s voice is sharp, and the boy recoils at once, eyes growing glassy. Pity darts through Joyce’s eyes, and she follows up with a gentle, “careful, son. Don’t step on the glass or you’ll hurt your toe.”

The boy nods and goes to sit at the kitchen table, eyeing his mom warily. Will just stands there, confused... wait. He’s not standing. He’s *floating*. When did that happen? He barely has time to think when a taller kid enters the room. And this time, there’s no confusion. He’d recognize a nine year-old Jonathan anywhere.

Jonathan smiles at the young boy - the young *him* - before walking to the fridge to retrieve breakfast. When he sees the broken glass, he gives Joyce a pained, solemn look. *Was Jonathan always this brooding? I don’t remember that. Or maybe I never noticed it. Young me certainly isn’t paying attention.*

Willie is too preoccupied with the shards of glass scraping across the floor as his mother unevenly tries to sweep. Somehow, the old her is even worse at domestic tasks. Will sits (well, floats) down next to Willie and stares at the glass. A beam of sunlight enters through a window, reflecting off the glass to produce a tiny rainbow. Willie gives a goofy laugh when he sees it, the screaming totally forgotten. The kid *really* likes rainbows, apparently.

Eventually, Joyce finishes and puts the broom away, then gracelessly strides over to the table. Her eyes are baggy, and Will notices that her right sleeve is pulled down slightly. Jonathan seems to have noticed too, because he’s frowning at that exact area. Yet another beam of

sunlight hits the table as his mother weakly smiles at her sons. It pains Will to think that she looks older now than the present Joyce does.

“So, Will, it’s your first day of school today. You excited? Jonathan asks.

Willie tries to speak between mouthfuls of cold chicken, which earns a reprimand from Joyce, but eventually he spits out a *yes* along with a bone. The boy’s optimism stirs something in Will, and for a moment he can feel the warmth of that peaceful August morning, his first day of kindergarten, despite the burdens of the heartbreak that’ll soon come.

“Hopefully you’ll make a nice friend at school,” Joyce says. “Try to be nice to the other boys, dear.”

“Yeah, meaning don’t throw plates at them,” Jonathan mutters.

“Hey! Enough of that, Jonathan. He’s your father, so behave yourself.”

Jonathan doesn’t say another word. Will desperately wishes his mother would listen to him, because he’s totally right. Lonnie won’t leave for another six years, and the thought of it makes him slightly nauseous. How Willie can have such a carefree grin is beyond him. Maybe Will should hire him as a therapist. That’s how self love works, right?

The family finish eating and sluggishly file into their Ford Pinto, with Will opting to float above it. The Hawkins of nine years ago is eerily identical; from the small stores with outdated signs to the small cracks in the sidewalk, everything looks like it hasn't changed. In a way, Hawkins is a town untouched by time, at least until that stupid AIDS epidemic.

By now, he's pretty sure that it's a dream. If it was a vision, he would be able to interact with people, or at least feel the breeze. If it was a panic attack, he would feel more, well, *panicky*. But instead, it's a mixture of anticipation and excitement that churns in his stomach. It's probably the most important day in his life, but why have this dream now? It's just the day that he first met Mike - *oh. Good job brain. You're really smooth.*

Soon, he witnesses that familiar moment of his mom kissing Willie goodbye on the forehead, and Willie proudly announcing he'll be fine. Of course, the boy is actually scared out of his mind, but Will knows he just wants to look strong. He can have a breakdown later, embarrass himself in private, spare his mother at least some anxiety.

Willie hesitantly takes his first steps into the building, and Will is about to follow when for the first time, he feels something physical on his shoulder. He turns around to be greeted by a flash of ruby red.

"Mr. Benson?"

His teacher's eyes are lifeless, and he doesn't respond to Will's words. Will notices that he's holding a copy of *The Hawkins Post* in his hand - strange. That edition's front cover is from 1984.

“You can’t run from the truth.”

A flash of white light envelops Mr. Benson, and he vanishes into the air, replaced by a cloud of multicoloured mist. *Uh, I don’t quite remember that from my first day of school. Was he in Hawkins at the time? No way...*

He decides to ignore it - dreams can be weird sometimes - and float-walks into the school. The halls are familiar, but he can’t remember where exactly Willie went. He spots a sea of bodies in front of him, but his younger self is nowhere to be found.

He *does*, however, spot a young, dark-skinned kid wearing a striped blue tee and camo shorts, and he grins, because that outfit was Lucas’s favourite when they were kids. Young Lucas is attempting to strike a conversation with a little girl, but she pretends to not notice him and walks directly past. The boy sulks momentarily, before picking himself up and walking to a pair of young boys. However, their reaction is the same - though at least they dismissively notice him. Will cringes slightly, wondering if he would have done any better. Probably not. Kids were brutal back then. And racist.

Will doesn’t bother to look for Dustin, El, or Max, since they all moved to Hawkins later, and he resists his urge to seek out Mike or Jen. Instead, he warily floats above the crowd, watching kids exchange awkward greetings and shyly looking at each other. He giggles to himself when he sees a boy holding a rose behind his back, staring at a young girl the way Will would stare at chocolate cake. *Someone’s a casanova.*

After a few more minutes of prepubescent pandemonium, the crowd starts to thin as the kids are herded into their homerooms by a few

middle-aged, clearly underpaid women. In the corner, he spots his kindergarten teacher - Donkey Face, as Mike called her - and he floats over to her. Her face is worn and haggard, but she at least tries to smile at the kids, blissfully unaware of how terrified they are by it. Will silently thanks himself that she gave up the act after a week.

He spots Willie tucked away in a corner, scribbling away at a scrap of paper with some crayons in a bucket. He smiles at the memory. He had been thrilled to find a complete set of sixty colours; Joyce couldn't afford a complete set with her salary, and Lonnie had refused to use his on anything but booze. Will floats over to Willie and absentmindedly watches him draw. The boy's style is... *developing*, to put it politely.

"Alright, let's begin," Donkey Face calls, slamming the door shut harder than necessary. She adjusts herself, and soon the fake, cheery woman is back. "I'm Mrs. Crowe. It's nice to meet everyone! I'm sure we'll have a great year together."

Oh, that was her name.

"I'd like everyone to come sit on the carpet," she says, pointing to a sun-shaped yellow rug next to her. "We can all introduce ourselves."

Some of the kids get up and move towards the carpet, while others are frozen, observing their teacher. Willie looks at her with a detached curiosity, but he doesn't move an inch. Mrs. Crowe sighs and repeats her instructions, encouraging the kids who have started migrating over.

It's at that moment that Will sees the young Mike. The boy is walking irritatingly slowly, an adorable pout on his face. Will laughs; Mike always did hate school when they were younger, calling it a 'prison,' and Will would nod along, because *prison* sounded really cool even though he had no clue what it meant. Telling his mom how much he loved being in prison with Mike was certainly an awkward experience - it was also one of the few times he heard his father genuinely laugh.

There's a growing coldness in his chest, and nerves claw away at him, filling him with longing. He misses Mike already. He really does. Damn it. Five days of separation and he already feels like his best friend - well, *classmate* now - is an entire galaxy away. Watching the young Mike idly scratch behind his ears or puff his cheeks in frustration is just too much. So he looks away. He has to hold taut the strings tugging at his heart.

Mrs. Crowe repeats her instructions for her third time, voice elevated a bit, and the remainder of the kids hurry to their seats when they recognize the angry parent voice, Willie included. Will sees him holding his new drawing in his hand - his *rainbow ship*, that glorious hodgepodge of coloured spots and lines he'd grow to despise.

A repressed memory unfolds and flashes through his mind at the sight of the ship - he sees himself giving it to Mike, the smile on Mike's face, and then Lonnie catching sight of it. A vortex of screams floods his ears, a cacophonous chorus consisting of himself, Mike, Lonnie, and Joyce. He sees his mother staring his drunken father down, and he sees Jonathan pulling him and Mike, both blubbering like baby animals, away to his room. He can smell the alcohol on his father's breath, feel the sting of the bruise on his mother's cheek. It's a sensory overload, and Will holds back the stream of tears he wants to shed. The five year-old boy had cried, but he knows better. After all, his mom never cried, and she was bleeding.

That stupid fucking ship. Why did I ever draw it? I should have burned it, not just thrown it in the trash like a pussy. I cared too much, like the stupid, sentimental fairy Troy says I am. If only I could rip it from that kid's hands now, spare him the pain, spare Mom the pain...

“You can cry, you know,” he hears a girl say behind him. He turns around to see Jen, *his* Jen, fourteen years and counting, with the same lifeless eyes that Mr. Benson had. “You don’t have to hide anymore. Just be yourself.”

“Jen?” His voice cracks slightly; he can’t help it.

She floats towards him, and her hand grazes his cheek. He flushes at the contact. Her touch is soft, almost motherly, and he can smell roses on her.

“Hmm, so I must be the second person you’ve told. Who’s the first?”

Told? Told what? Did I tell her something? And second. Who was first, Mike?

But before he can ask, he feels warm hands embracing him, and then she’s gone, replaced by a bright burst of coloured mist. If he was slightly confused earlier, now he’s just lost. He doesn’t let the thousands of new thoughts consume him, though, and he tries to train his gaze on Willie, Mike, anything really. The next few minutes are a blur, and the realization of what’s about to come sneaks up on him. He breaks a cold sweat at the thought. *Donkey Face is gonna send*

us all outside, and I'll go to those swings. And then...

Soon, he's following the pack of kids as they run outside like hyperactive sheep. That characteristic awkwardness of the first day of school slowly starts to dissipate as the kids scatter across the playground, tentative friend groups crystallizing. Some chase each other around in circles, while others trace out a grid to play four square. Willie stands at the door frame, panic in his eyes, until a teacher pushes him away and he starts awkwardly roaming around the playground. A few times, Will sees him about to approach other groups when he stops in his tracks, terrified.

Will sighs. It's even more embarrassing now, somehow. *Things really don't change much. Guess Mike was so special because he talked to me first. He found me first. Honestly, I'm not sure I'd want that to change.*

Then Willie notices the swings, which are surprisingly empty, and he perches himself there, solemnly looking at the other kids. The boy takes a deep breath, too light to be a sigh, but too heavy for a happy kid. Will wonders if he's about to scream when he notices Mike slowly wandering towards the swings. He's trying to look nonchalant, but Will's smart enough to know the five year-old's true intentions. If only *his* Mike was this easy to read; maybe then he'd know why he said what he did.

He never noticed it then, but he sees now the *terrified* look on Mike's face. Despite all the pouting and anger, he's so damn scared, so alone. Mike told him this in gory detail later, but seeing it again - even in a dream - is another feeling entirely.

Willie has noticed Mike, and the moody glance shifts into an apprehensive one. He looks away, and Mike quickens his pace. The

boy doesn't even realize it, given how surprised he seems when he has to catch his breath. Mike plops himself onto the swing next to Willie, and both boys sit in silence for a moment.

Mike breaks the silence, like he always has. "Um... hi. I'm Mike."

"Oh, uh. Hi, Mike." Willie pauses, and then adds in a rush, "I'm Will."

"Will. Will," Mike repeats the name to himself several times. A smile lights up his face. He clears his throat - probably for dramatic effect, though it just looks cute - and gives Willie a weird look that throws the other boy off. "Hey Will, do you wanna be my friend?"

Willie's eyes widen, like a girl on the receiving end of a marriage proposal. Will can't fault his younger self, though, because he knows about the bond that'll form. A bond he threw into the wind like trash. Fitting that there's a light breeze then, a prelude to the storm to come. But no matter the tempest, Will could never see himself saying no. Saying yes was, well, is the best thing he's ever done.

And Willie seems to agree. "Yes."

The next thing he knows, he's in his bed again, face damp with sweat, breathing heavily. He sits up and shakes his head, dazed at the sudden awakening. Will glances at his alarm clock: it's 3:25 AM.

"Damn it, Mike," he says to no one in particular. "What just happened?"

Why would his brain pick *that* memory? He's never dreamed of that day before, not in that kind of vivid detail. And Mr. Benson again, but now Jen too? Plus, that mist, that coloured mist, it was a *rainbow* mist. Everything's a rainbow now. And he might just have figured out why.

But then again, when he thinks about it, him and Mike did have a good run. It was the closest relationship he had with anyone, except maybe his mom or Jonathan. Honestly, he could probably call it *lo-oh no. Please, no. Don't let it be that. It can't be that.... it's that, isn't it? Will, you pathetic son of a bitch, why?*

Sitting alone in the tranquil night, still on a high from his dream, Will Byers realizes three things. First, there's something suspicious about his dreams. It's nothing supernatural, probably, but *something* is going on. Second, he needs to resolve the tension between him and Mike. He can't cleave the Party in two, not after everything, and after five days he's already guilt-ridden.

The third is something he's said many times in his life, but this time it stings harder than any wasp, cuts deeper than any blade. Mike was right the whole time.

Shit. I'm in love with Mike.

Notes for the Chapter:

The plot thickens! Lots of foreshadowing in this one, heehee. No clue why, but I just really love the idea of Mike "affectionately" calling his teacher Donkey Face and Will just getting way too into the idea. This chapter is a bit low on dialogue, but there will be plenty next chapter, no worries :D

One of our boys has (sorta) realized his feelings, but there's a LONG way to go before he can meaningfully do anything about them. So in the meantime, time to figure out those weird dreams.

Next chapter will be from Mike's POV, and we finally get to see a certain other member of the Party whom we haven't been seen since Chapter 1.

As always, I love to hear anything you have to say :)
Until next week!

-Dan

7. The Night Before

September 6th, 1985

It's not my fault you don't like girls... but what if it is? Will... What if I blamed the wrong person? No, I can't think like that right now. Yeah I fucked up, but no point thinking about it. I can't think of a single time Will's ever shoved me like that; he's so pissed it's unreal. Not like I have a way to apologize because then I'd have to explain why I opened my big fat mouth and said that. Gah. Nice going, Mike.

Mike usually loves the long bike ride to El's house - it's a great way to decompress and bask in the evening breeze - but tonight his thoughts constrict him. Well, not just tonight. More like every night for the last week. He bitterly wonders what Will is thinking about, before groaning when he remembers that Homecoming date he'll be having with Jen tomorrow evening. He's probably concerned with what colour flowers bring out her eyes or how tight her dress will be.

It's not like Mike *hates* Jen. Will could do far worse than a pretty blonde with a great hairstyle, sunny disposition, artsy nature, and a gentle, tranquilizing voice. Well, ok, maybe he's a *little* bit resentful. But it's because Will got a nice date without any real effort and nothing else. The Byers boy said it himself, after all: it's always a competition with two guys.

Mike cautiously feels his back to make sure his backpack is zipped shut, something he's been doing a lot recently. Probably since he's carrying that stupid paperback, *Under the Rainbow*, and for some reason he compulsively stashes it away like sacred contraband whenever another human being approaches him. But not carrying it would mean losing opportunities to sneak out of study hall to read a

chapter, or worse, potentially leaving it for his mom to find. *Wonder if Linda has any tips on hiding this stuff, or would that be too direct to ask about? She did mention there was a sequel last time I visited, so maybe I can ask her when I go to pick that up.*

At long last, he's at the door, and he softly knocks, praying that Hopper won't answer the door. But when the door opens, he finds himself wishing it *was* the Police Chief.

"You're here too, Wheeler? Scram. This is a girl's night," Max chides, face slightly red when he notices her thin pink cotton pajamas and smirks.

He shrugs. "I wanted to talk to El. Well, El wanted to talk to me. Besides, I'd make a great girl," he says, trying to bat his eyelashes seductively. Unfortunately, it looks like a seizure, and Max just groans.

"Jesus. You can come in if you swear to *never* do that again. Not that Hopper would like you being here very much."

"He never likes me being here," Mike says, flicking his shoes to the side.

"Touché."

The two trudge over to El's room, neither saying a word or sparing a glance. It's not like they're still enemies - they get along well enough

with Lucas or Will to mediate them - but he's still not sure he would call Max a *friend*, per se. She's a member of the Party, but she's more of an acquaintance. Plus, she could never replace El despite Lucas and Dustin having been so hellbent on it last year. *This is what happens when you let guys think with their dicks.*

El's face lights up when she sees him, and she rushes from the puzzle she was working on to hug him. Max playfully rolls her eyes and starts picking up the pieces that were tossed aside before shoving them into an abandoned corner. Mike settles himself on the floor while the girls spread onto the bed.

"So, why are you here again Wheeler? Something about you chatting with El?" Max's face then lights up in horror. "Oh no, please don't tell me you're asking her to Homecoming now because we *just* made plans."

He laughs and shakes his head. "Without a bouquet of roses and a huge poster? Hard pass. When I do things, I do them big."

"We all know you're overcompensating, dude.'

"Actually," El says, her voice soft and shy, "I wanted to talk to both of you."

When both him and Max give her nods, she continues: "Mike, is Will okay? I worry about him. He's sad. Very sad."

Oh. Well. Why would he be sad? It's not like he wants something he can't have.

"Maybe you're just seeing things."

"Bullshit!"

If Mike were standing, he would have leaped backward at that. Whoa, El? Where'd you learn to say that? Either Hopper's been having one too many drinks or... goddamnit, Max.

Max gives her a high five. "Hey, you used it right! Good job," she says, patting El on the back and causing Mike to flush. "He is indeed bullshitting. Will and him had some sort of fight, and now they hate each other or something? I dunno, ask Mike."

Mike rubs his temple, bracing himself for truth time. "El, listen—"

"Friends don't lie, Mike."

Yeah, he smiles, so good thing Will and I aren't friends.

"Look, I can't really talk about it. Is he that upset?"

"To me, he looked devastated," Max says.

El nods. “He was crying last time he came.” Her voice then rises as she adds, “so if you hurt him, I’ll be mad.”

Crying? He knows that he screwed up that day, but in that moment it hits him exactly how Will must be feeling, especially if Mike was right, though he has been systematically ignoring that possibility. He’s too bothered by how little it would bother him if Will *was*, uh, not that kind of guy. In a weird way, it might even be desirable... just to lower the competition for girls, of course. It’s stupid to wish such fates on one’s former friends, he knows that, but still.

“He visits me the most,” El says, earning a simultaneous *sorry* from Max and Mike. “Gives me more attention than you did when we dated. I asked what happened, but he was too sad.”

“You’re overreacting. Not sure if it’s a girl thing,” he turns to Max and meets her look of fury head on, “but it’s nothing serious.”

Max gets up the bed and walks over to him, towering over his seated form. Mike feels himself getting grabbed by the shirt, and the next thing he knows, Max is in his face.

“Listen here, you sexist piece of shit,” she says, voice venomous, “Don’t think you can get away with that. I know a lie when I see one. I talked to Will the other day. He didn’t tell me the exact details, but I *know* what you did. You. Are. An. Asshole.”

Ok, he’s angry now. He shoves himself free from her death grip and

shouts back: "This is none of your business, so stay out!"

"It became my business when you ruined the Party. You aren't just a horrible person; you're also a horrible leader."

He steps towards her, and now he's the one in her face. "Shut up. Just shut up. You don't know anything."

"ENOUGH!"

He feels himself falling backwards, like an invisible hand is shoving him. He thuds roughly to the floor, hands scraping against the wooden planks. He's about to yell at Max when he notices she's also on the floor. He turns to the bed to see El with her hand protruding outwards, fire in her eyes. Max, to his surprise, is beaming. Probably something about those female independence lessons she's been giving El. Honestly, he kind of likes it himself.

"Time out, both of you. You're being little kids," El chides.

Max sighs, then moves back to the bed. El gives her a hard look, but then scoots over to allow the other girl space.

"Sorry, Mike. I shouldn't have grabbed you. I hate it when Billy does that to me."

He grows slightly uncomfortable at that mental image and tries to

rub it out. "Yeah, sorry."

"If you tell us, maybe we can help," El says.

He pauses at that. It's true that if there's a shred of hope left in repairing his friendship with Will, it's through El or Max. Lucas has been radio silent, and Dustin's just frustrated at this point and recoiling into himself, weirdly similar to Will.

"Besides, you told Lucas, didn't you?" Max's expression is now a curious one. "I get that we're not chums or anything, but if he already knows, it's not like I'd blab to him. And like, it's kind of a sore spot between us. If you want to beef with Will, that's on you, but I don't wanna lose my relationship."

What? Oh no, did he figure something out? And they're arguing too? With what Max and Lucas said about Mr. Benson in mind, they might be on to me...

"I haven't told Lucas anything."

"Ah. Well, he's been giving Will nasty looks all week, though he's been trying to hide it when I'm around. He's kinda scared too. A bit like Troy that one day."

Yup, she's definitely on to me. Which means Lucas is too. Shit. Wait, he agrees with what I told Will. Double shit.

El bristles at the mention of the bully. Mike realizes that Troy would probably thank his lucky stars that Hopper's too cautious to send her to school for another year; otherwise, he'd probably have something way worse than wet pants. He tries to calm himself down before getting lost in evil daydreams.

"I'll talk to him about that." He knows he'll likely chicken out, but it won't hurt him to make the promise now. "And about our fight, I sorta called Will something I should never have called him. Ever."

Max gasps, which is weird to Mike since she already knows. "You called him *that*? That's even worse than I thought!"

He looks at her with confusion for a second. Then it sinks in.

"Oh god! No, I didn't slur at him or anything. I just, sorta, uh implied it."

"That's not any better," Max says, though the relieved exhale she gives says otherwise. "Jesus, you're his best friend. You know how sensitive he is about that."

"I'm lost," El blurts. "Can you explain?"

"Mike, you should be the one to do it."

For once, he agrees. *Here goes nothing*, he thinks, then starts his explanation: “So I implied that Will was qu- that he was gay, and-”

“I know what that means!”

“You do?” Max and Mike say it simultaneously, then share a look as if to say *don’t ask me*.

El hums a soft yes. “It’s when someone is happy. I read it in a book,” she says, chest puffed with pride (not that kind).

Mike laughs at that, and he can see Max trying to stifle her own laugh. But when he sees El frowning at the mockery, he stops.

“El, gay is when a boy loves another boy, or a girl loves another girl. Some people don’t like that very much, including most of Hawkins.”

El’s mouth opens in an O-shape as she processes the information. Mike prepares himself to try and string together an explanation about *why* because of course she’ll ask that. But honestly, when he tries to do it, nothing pops up. Sure, his parents say it’s wrong, but they never really elaborate. And El’s not religious, so a Bible explanation wouldn’t work. He scratches his brain, trying to think of an explanation, when he sees El smirk.

“Boys kissing? That’s hot.”

“Uh, what?” *Ok, I was NOT expecting that.*

Max manages to choke out an “atta girl” before she bursts into hideous laughter, half rolling over on the bed like Troy’s mom with the mailman. Her laughter goes from Max Mayfield to SNL studio track to amused orangutan. It’s quite an entertaining sight, and Mike has to stop himself from joining in. El barely contains her own giggle, but eventually she gives him a straight look.

“Why? Why does Hawkins hate gay?”

Max takes over from him, having recovered partially from her outburst. She’s rubbing her sides as she says, “Because they’re stupid. There’s no reason to hate gay people. In California, there’s a lot more gay-friendly people than here. Small towns are rough like that.”

Mike then pops in, though he’s not sure whether he’s speaking with his own voice or with Ted’s: “But, uh, what about AIDS? That’s a gay disease.”

He clenches his teeth and takes a step back when he says that , waiting for Max to explode at him, but instead she calmly shakes her head. When she speaks, her voice is gentle:

“Fair question. They teach you more about it in Cali cuz the first AIDS case was there. But that’s not true. It’s not a gay disease at all. Tell me, Mike, can you- er, can a straight person get stabbed by a needle?”

He nods. El cringes a bit at the mention of a needle but also nods.

“Then you’re vulnerable to AIDS. Well, HIV actually. Might wanna learn about it now that it’s here. Ask Mr. Benson, maybe, cuz he’s from New York. It’s transferred through body fluids, and sex...” she chokes out the word, and El gives her a quizzical look, “is just one way of getting it.”

“Wait, what’s se-”

“Later, El,” Mike says, noting how red Max’s face is.

But it’s too late, because the rabbit hole he hasn’t thought about has opened. *Oh yeah, gay people have sex too. Wonder how they do it? Are the rumours on the schoolyard true, about them doing it up the- ew, nope, not thinking about that. But on the other hand... maybe I should ask Mr. Benson. WAIT, NO. Bad Mike.*

El watches his internal debate with an uncomfortable curiosity, and judging from her laughter, he must be making some *really* awkward expressions. If he and Will were still friends, he’d never be able to stop hearing about it.

“Ok,” El says, motioning to Max to continue.

“We were talking about Will. Mike, do you actually think Will is gay? I mean, he just got a girlfriend.”

“Jen is *not* his girlfriend,” he all but shouts, and it takes him about half a second to regret it. *Damn it. Fell right into her trap.*

“In that case, you crossed a border you shouldn’t have. If Will is gay, he’d have told us himself when he felt ready. You do *not* try to force people out of the closet.”

Her voice cracks slightly, and the appeal is so passionate that he’s tempted to wrap his arm around her shoulders. Wow, Will’s rubbing off on him even now.

“Are you ok?” El moves over to Max and rubs her shoulder, and the other girl nods a yes.

“Yeah. So Mike,” she says, staring into his soul, eyes aflame with passion, “why don’t you think about your actions for two damn seconds? You have no idea how much you fucked up here.”

He tries to stammer out a meek rebuttal, but Max kills it with a glare.

“Say that Will *is* gay. He’s already getting bullied for it, and now he has to deal with the entire town scrutinizing him even harder than they did when he was fucking kidnapped. He has no idea what you have and haven’t said. For all he knows, you’ve mouthed off to Lucas or Dustin or, god forbid, even Troy...”

“I would never do that!”

“Does Will know that? Have you spent a single moment in this last week wondering how Will *might* just have viewed your little fight, especially if he was gay?”

Oh. Mike doesn't bother with a retort, and he suddenly feels the energy drain away from him. He breaks off eye contact and looks at the floor, but Max's gaze is burned in his mind like a jumpscare in a horror movie. He'll be seeing that in his nightmares tonight.

El pipes up: “he must think Mike hates him for being gay. W-was that why he was crying?”

“No idea, but it's messed up either way. Mike, you were, no, you *are* his best friend. You're one of the most important people in his life, maybe even the most important. I don't know. But you rejected him. Now he's living with the fear that the person he loves most might expose him to the world, whether or not it's even true. So get your head out of your ass, grow up, and realize what you did.”

He's not sure how to react, so he just freezes. Something about what she said feels so *personal*, so relatable, and it's more than off putting. It's alive and real. *Will... I'm so sorry. I'm the asshole. Oh my god, what the hell did I do? I don't even... I can't... no.*

But somehow, it gets worse. He starts crying.

It's ugly and visceral and the complete opposite of what he needs - boys don't cry, after all - but he can't help it. He didn't just hurt a random person. He hurt *Will*. He didn't just cross a line, he blazed through it, spitting in Will's face. Mike has prided himself on emotional resilience, but now he can't process anything except shame.

"Mike? Max, you should stop." El's voice is laced with concern and fear, and she's shuffling on the bed, probably to move over to him, but he hears Max reprimand her.

"No. He needs to hear it. All of it. I'm not holding back. It's obvious Will means everything to him. So he's going to hear every single word, and then he's going to give the best apology that Byers has ever heard. Got it?"

He doesn't respond, but he doesn't dare block her out.

"Mike, if you had even a fraction of a clue how much shit gay people go through, you wouldn't have said a word. You've seen Will get bullied in front of you for years, but there's so much more. Gay kids can get abandoned by their families, be tossed to the streets like pieces of dirt. They get stepped on and insulted, spat on, called a freak and abomination and sinner. And with AIDS going around, nobody wants to help! Can you think of any gay role models for kids to look up to? Jobs for them? Homes? Communities? For Christ's sake, some even get *killed* for it. All for loving a different person."

Each word stings him harder as the situation paints itself in his mind, a picture so bleak and desolate it puts Will's angstiest drawings to shame. And he's bawling now, sprawled on the floor like a baby, all masculinity leaving him. It's just too easy to picture the scene, like it

could even happen to *him*. As Max's tirade continues, he finds it harder to resist imagining himself in those scenarios.

"Max, please stop," El pleads, but Max ignores her.

"Killed, Mike, killed. If Will is gay, who knows if his family would accept him? He's mentioned his dad once, and it's not a good look. Do you want to imagine Will on the streets, alone and hungry and broken? Do you want to think of Will getting bruised, or beaten, or even killed?"

"MAX! STOP!"

He doesn't look up, but he feels a burst of warmth as El's arms softly embrace him. It's a feeling of security, of safety, of comfort. A few moments later, he feels a foreign pair of arms on his shoulder, and he looks up to see Max in the group hug. *Weird, but not unwelcome, I guess.*

Max grunts and steps back, and he sees her clearing her throat, readying an apology.

"I got a bit carried away. Sorry. It's just the thought of someone hurting Tristan - er, Will. Someone hurting Will. It just sucks, ya know?"

Tristan?

Mike nods, and slowly wiggles free from El's hug, instead slotting her hands in his own like he saw Will and Jen do that fateful day. It feels a lot less romantic to actually do it. He can sorta see why Will found it nice. He looks at Max, who is staring at the wall behind him and El.

"No, he needed to hear it," El says. "Don't say sorry. I just didn't want to think of Will getting hurt."

"El's right. I can't believe I'm saying this - and I'm never gonna say it again, so savour it - but thank you, Max. I needed that," he says. *I'm going soft. First Mr. Benson, then Max? I've thanked a grand total of three people in the last month.*

"Um. No problem? It gets better, Mike. At least, I hope. This whole situation is shitty, but you can make it up to Will. Tomorrow, in fact. At Homecoming."

And there's the catch. He's not *scared* of going to Homecoming, per se, but the thought of having to watch Will and Jen be happy together, even as "just friends," while he's alone? He muddles over the thought before he remembers something Will said during their fight.

You ditched me at the Snow Ball; do it again.

He hadn't given much thought to it at the time, but he shivers at the realization. Instinctively, he yanks his hands away from El, ignoring

the hurt look on her face. *I can't call Will an asshole because I did the exact same thing to him. Figures.*

“Mike? It’s not that complicated. Go to Will and tell him you’re sorry, and that you don’t care what he is.”

“But what if I *do* care?”

“Then risk losing your best friend forever. Oh, and splitting the Party up. Have fun hanging out with Lucas, because I’d certainly stick with Will.”

Wow, thanks for the support. She really does not hold back though.

“Ok, and if he doesn’t accept my apology?” Mike challenges.

Max responds by laughing, and he hears a cute giggle from El at his side. He’s about to ask what exactly is funny, when El cuts him off:

“Mike, Will talked more about you yesterday than he talked about Jen in a week. He’ll forgive. He forgives everyone. Well, not his dad. But he loves you!”

Mike gives her a nervous smile - *she meant it platonically, she meant it platonically* - and Max gives him a scandalous smirk.

“Aww, he’s blushing. He does care.”

If it wasn’t the devil herself saying it, he wouldn’t feel so mocked.

“Shut up. I don’t even have a date to the dance.”

“I have an idea,” El says, face lighting up, “you should go with Dustin!”

Max snorts.

“Damn, El, you’re getting good at this,” she says, grinning. “We can move into stage two of training soon.”

“That sounds evil,” Mike mutters, “and El, I’m not g-gay. But maybe the Party can go as friends? We can slap that hot blonde wig on you again.”

“Good idea. Lucas told me all about how the school was talking about how Mike was banging his Swedish cousin last time you did it.”

Mike and El both stammer incoherently at that before spitting out a simultaneous *eww*, *gross*. And then they’re all laughing, teasing and poking each other into the night.

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Eventually, Hopper kicks him out rather brutally, which Mike supposes has something to do with the migraine he seems to be having. That, and maybe a *bit* too much alcohol. He wonders for a moment if he'll drink as much alcohol as half the dads in Hawkins seem to. That is, if he ever becomes a dad.

Max is walking him to his bike, still in her pink cotton PJs. She doesn't say much, but a companionable silence is better than a solitary one, especially since he's too caught up thinking whenever he's alone. She's still not his top choice of companion, but she was definitely lower down the list earlier this evening. And he has to admit it now: she's a friend.

The silence breaks when he steps on a stray leaf, the first trace of Autumn in Hawkins. He hears the soft crunch beneath his feet, and then there's a cricket chirping in the background.

"So, uh, sorry," he blurts out.

Max looks to him, confused, and he adds, "for uh, how I treated you. You know, like back when you joined the Party? You're actually pretty cool, sometimes. I was a dick because you weren't El."

"Or Will," she adds.

He shoots her a glare, before sighing: "Or Will."

“Apology accepted. Now, let’s never talk about this again because sappy is not my thing, nor is it yours... that said, I’m glad to know you’re not as big of an ass as I thought.”

“Wow, thanks. Glad I set the bar so high.”

“Well, most don’t put their friends above the fear of possible gayness. Especially in AIDS times. That deserves like, an ounce of credit,” she teases, voice devoid of malice.

They reach his Mike and he mounts himself on. He’s about to pedal off when he decides to ask about something bugging him:

“Max, who’s Tristan?”

She freezes.

“I didn’t ask in front of El for a reason. I’m not stupid.”

“It’s *none* of your business,” she says, growling slightly. But he’s not fazed.

“Is he gay?”

Max frowns, so that's a yes.

"Is he a friend?"

"*W-was*. He *was* my boyfriend. And my best friend. Like you and Will."

Was? Oh, Max. I hope that doesn't mean what I think it does. I knew something was up when she talked about all that stuff. Including getting killed. What happened in California? And a girl can have a gay boyfriend? Unless it's possible to like both, but can that even happen?

"Oh. Sorry."

"Forget we talked about it. Mike, there's something I've been meaning to ask you. I answered you, so you're gonna answer me."

He grips his handlebars a bit tighter. If it's the question he thinks she's going to ask, he has to be ready. Either way, once he answers, he's leaving.

"Why did you pick the moment after Will got a girlfriend to imply that he was gay like that?"

There's a true answer to that question, but he's not willing to entertain it. So instead, his last words to her before pedalling off are:

“Maybe I just wanted things to be different.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Ah Mike, so close yet so far. It was fun to get to write the girls again, especially El because it's been a while since she last showed up. She's being homeschooled, but at the same time she's doing a degree in sass because frankly, sassy El is my favourite. El and Will never interact much in the show, so them being super close here is mostly a head canon (though it's basically fanon at this point). And Max's life in California is something I don't see elaborated on too much, but I think it's pretty interesting to see how living there would give her a different perspective compared to a small town like Hawkins. It wasn't quite as supportive as today, but compared to Hawkins it's a world of difference.

And Mike doesn't quite seem to know what bisexual is. Hmm, wonder if he'll learn about it at some point in the near future.

Anyhow, next chapter is a two-parter that deals with Homecoming (first two parter out of many...)! We'll see Will's POV first, and then Mike's, and plenty of the Party and even another character whom we've seen so far, but not in much detail.

I'd love to hear from y'all, as always :) Till next week!

-Dan

8. Homecoming - Part I

Summary for the Chapter:

Tonight,
Will and Jonathan bond,
Jen is an asparagus missionary,
and Homecoming shenanigans ensue.

Notes for the Chapter:

CW: This chapter has some descriptions of violent events. It's not graphic enough to merit an archive warning, nor is violence a recurring theme of the story. It's around the level one would expect in canon.

Also, the usual warnings for period-typical homophobia, sexism, ableism. But you're probably aware of this if you're reading the story.

September 7th, 1985

Mess. Chaos. Disorder. Pure entropy. No word seems to capture the whirlwind of thoughts blowing Will's mind in every direction. He's desperate to regain his control, to stand his ground and weather the storm like always, but his foundation has cracked. Mike figured out his secret - his newest secret, at least - *before* him. So he knows. And God, who else has he told? Lucas, almost certainly. Dustin's been growing quiet too. Not El. Max, he doesn't really know. Luckily, Mike isn't vengeful enough to tell Jen; that would end him.

And somehow, Will has the gall to *love* this boy? Half the day is spent cursing his name, bitterly stewing over what he has become, but then

he remembers his dream of those halcyon days he'd spent with Mike and the hate vanishes. He can't truly hate Mike. Without Mike, Will would be a clump of particles in the dust blowing aimlessly in the wind, another name in the sea of tombstones scattered across Hawkins cemetery. He's a door, and Mike is his key. He just never realized he was a *closet* door.

For the remainder of the week, he retreats into himself, silent and solemn. He keeps his head down, sits anxiously in class, and walks in the shadows. Talking to Jen has become horrendously awkward; he can't delude himself into crushing on her anymore. Truthfully, he doubted he ever could, but the fantasy has been sheared anew. She's still a friend, and he likes her as one - a lot, in fact. Her touches are the warmth of a fireplace on a winter evening, and her smile is Joyce-level reassuring. But when he closes his eyes and tries to see himself having a future with her, he just can't. No, he sees someone else.

The morning of the Homecoming dance, he finds himself thrashing about in bed after another nightmare. Fantastic start. It's a repeat of that dream, but this time instead of Mike sitting next to Willie on the swings, it's that *creature* he keeps seeing - the same parasitic, venomous beast. Will sighs and looks at his pills. He's tempted to swallow two, because aren't these damn things supposed to make him happy? Or at least less empty? But then he remembers the price to be paid, literally, and instead he swallows just one, along with the remainder of his pride.

It's a lazy Saturday, so there's nothing pressing to do. He doesn't quite feel like visiting Jen or El, and he's too lost in thought to attempt his algebra assignment, so instead he finds himself lounging on the couch, idly letting the hours pass by. His mom is at a weekend shift, and Jonathan is busy with work, so he's alone. Well, not exactly...

“Chester!” He calls out on an impulse. Moments pass without a response, and then he feels that familiar bundle of white fur on his chest. He strokes the dog’s back, earning him a nuzzle. *Chester’s growing a bit old* , he thinks, *but you can never be too old for catch.*

Will runs to his closet (the literal one) and rummages through old shirts, shorts, underwear, and books, Chester watching the scene and looking way too amused for an old geyser. His mom will probably yell at him later - she’s paranoid about messy rooms because they’re a ‘sign of depression,’ according to some parenting book. She’s probably right, but he’s not willing to keep his best friend waiting.

He retrieves an old baseball and walks outside and into the nearby woods, Chester trotting along at his side. Soon, he arrives at the familiar patch of greenery near Castle Byers, and he throws the ball for the dog to fetch. Chester limps a bit at first, clearly unaccustomed to the exercise, but soon the two settle into a familiar rhythm. And Will’s the happiest he’s been in a week.

This baseball used to belong to Lonnie, didn’t it? He gave it to Jonathan, who didn’t want it, so I got it. Wonder if I could’ve been good at tee-ball? Probably not, but maybe some sport would make me less of a pansy. Might as well kick the queer out of me if nothing else works. Fuck, even Lonnie was right about me. And here I am, throwing his ball, years after he tried to fix me. Not that he was ever right, that piece of shit. But mom gave up her marriage for this reject...

Chester tugs at his leg, and he smiles and chucks the ball again, a bit further than usual. He needs some time to think, to *really* think. To formulate. To devise a plan. He’s dealt with the personification of evil and lived through its mind molestation. He can deal with a crush of

all things.

“Ruff!”

“Oh, good boy. That was fast. Ok, I’m gonna throw this one at an angle. Get ready!”

But before he throws the ball, he feels a hand on his arm. He turns around to see the warm face of his brother. Chester woofs happily before reaching his front feet out to Jonathan, awkwardly balancing himself on his hind legs. Jonathan scoops him up and ruffles his fur.

“Mind if I do one?”

“Yeah. Go for it.”

Jonathan sets Chester down and hurls the ball, and the dog bursts off like a bolt of lightning, old age now a forethought. His older brother grimaces momentarily at the sight of the ball, but his expression returns to neutral fast. Older Jonathan is certainly more discreet about his brooding, and Will realizes he would never notice were it not for his dreams. But it’s there, like old scars that sometimes itch.

“So, what brings you out here for fetch? Haven’t seen that ball in a while, either,” Jonathan says.

“Just trying to pass the time. I’m, uh, a bit nervous about the dance

tonight.”

“That’s natural. I was nervous too, you know? Didn’t have a date to it, but you know how those events are.”

“Yeah. Guess antisocial is a Byers thing.”

“Well, we don’t need to socialize. Not everyone has the best family in the world.” Jonathan reaches out to ruffle Will’s hair, and he smacks his hand away affectionately. “Besides, you’ve still got the Party, right? Even if you and Mike... uh, are what you are.”

“I don’t know.”

“It’ll work out. Remember how we all tried to rescue you together? I saw how much they care about you. Mike especially. You’re the most important person in his life.”

Will snorts, in the same way Max would. “Hah! Sure. Mike probably calls everyone a queer then.”

Jonathan pauses. Shock flashes through his eyes, but then closes them and inhales, and when his eyes open, Will sees pure fury. It’s the same look Jonathan would make after comforting him while their parents argued like beasts. Will would never want to be on the receiving end, but he knows he never will. Jonathan’s not Mike. He would never hurt his brother, not when the world spits on both of them so much.

Will feels Chester whimpering against his leg, and he reaches down to take the dog in his arms. *Poor guy hasn't seen this Jonathan in years. I wonder if Chester would care if I was a filthy queer...*

"Well. Guess I was wrong. I'm going to the Wheeler's place right now. Time to teach Mike what happens when you mess with my little brother."

"Wait, don't! Please. Don't hurt Mike. And what about Nancy? She's your girlfriend."

"If Nancy condones this, I'll break up with her. No questions asked."

"You *love* her!"

"And I love my brother more."

"Ruff!" Chester barks in agreement.

Will tucks the dog into one arm and grabs Jonathan's shoulder with his other. "Please, Jonathan. You're the one who taught me everything I know about patience. And he's my best friend, no matter what. So *please* , calm down."

He sees his brother's shoulders loosen and breathes a sigh of relief.

“You’re gonna forgive him again, aren’t you?”

“I don’t know,” he answers truthfully. *Kind of hard to stay mad at someone for being right.*

Jonathan leans in, and Will feels firm hands wrap around him and Chester, who shifts uncomfortably in Will’s arm. He giggles slightly at the dog’s misery before gently putting him on the floor and hugging his brother back.

“Will, you’re worth so much more than people tell you,” Jonathan says, before picking up the baseball from Chester’s mouth and brushing the saliva off on his jeans. “Do you remember the day I gave you this ball?”

Will nods. How could he forget? “It’s that day that dad- I mean, Lonnie, never showed up to take us to that baseball game. Mom got really mad at him for it.”

“Yeah. We sat together and listened to Clash.” Will sees Jonathan’s lips curve into a small smile. “ *Should I Stay or Should I Go* . I played that song endlessly when we were looking for you.”

Will perks up; his brother has always been cautious to divulge the exact details of their search for him, though he’s pieced bits and pieces of it from Mike and the others. He forgets sometimes that it was rough for his mom and Jonathan too, that they cared as much as they did, never giving up on him. But he picked that song, *their* song,

despite the baggage? Will restrains himself from cutting off Jonathan with another hug.

“That day, I told you that you shouldn’t like things just because people say you’re supposed to. Who gives a shit about normal? The people who love you don’t. If Mike forgets that, he doesn’t deserve to be friends with you.”

“O-ok.” A pause, and then, “Thanks, Jonathan.”

And this time, he does hug his brother, and when he feels Chester nuzzle against their feet, he lifts the dog into the embrace. It’s a family hug, after all.

Should I tell him? N-no, I can’t. I’m still not fully sure yet. Maybe it’s just a phase, or maybe I’m just confusing myself. I was jealous of Mike a week ago, and now in love? Come on, that’s unrealistic. Do I even want Mike, or do I just want to be Mike? No point worrying Jonathan about this shit. There’s gotta be someone else who can help me. Maybe Mr. Benson or something. But I’m not going to hurt Jonathan. Or mom. And damn if dad’s influence is still here. Jonathan’s trustworthy, but I’m not.

“I’m heading inside,” he says. “Gonna go draw something.”

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He’s lazily sketching away at a figure, lost in his daydreams, trying to ignore the pit in his stomach that swells with each passing moment.

He tries to think rationally. Calmly. Nobody but Mike and Lucas (and maybe Dustin) know. Nobody can hurt him if they don't know. Jonathan will be there, and Max too, and even Mr. Benson as a chaperone. But reason is anathema to anxiety, and he feels himself about to spiral into a panic attack.

Will tries to lie on his back, breathing evenly like his mother and Mike have told him to do time and time again. The tension builds in his muscles, and he feels himself ache, trying to not let the sensation overwhelm him. *Oh god, oh crap, not again.*

His mind feels aflame, and *there's* that fear that he's going to die. Chester, hearing his laboured breathing, hops onto the couch and carefully pokes Will, and Will tries to lean into the touch. But no luck. Too late. He braces himself, and lets the sensation dull him for several painful minutes.

A while later, his breath is still slightly laboured, and he lies on the couch, immobilized and exhausted. But he can't close his eyes or doze off, because his mind is *convinced* that his nightmare demons will get him. Plus, his rational side hasn't returned from the vacation it took during his episode. So, he lies on the couch, devoid of energy, until an hour later he hears Joyce enter and pushes himself up. He then looks over to the drawing, wondering what exactly he ended up sketching.

It's a paladin in shining armour. Well, shit.

He picks it up before anyone can see - another fine addition to the trash bin - and starts making his way to his room when he hears his mother's call:

“Will! Honey, you here?”

“In the living room,” he says, masking the raspiness of his voice with a cough.

Joyce enters and tosses her keys somewhere she’ll inevitably forget the next morning. Will stuffs the drawing behind in his shorts pockets as his mother motions for him to sit on the sofa.

“Will, dear, are you alright? Did you have another panic attack? You’re shaking. Oh, Will,” she sighs.

And there’s that look of disappointment. Well, she insists it’s not, but he knows what it really is. She loves him, sure, but how could she love the way he ruins great days by being an unstable, moody mess? How could she love how his stupidly overpriced antidepressants force her and Jonathan to work extra shifts? How can she *ever* smile at the son who gave up on her, gave up on their family when they’ve done everything for him...

“I’m fine,” he lies, more to reassure himself than to convince her.

“Well,” she says, voice an artificial squeak, “tonight’s my son’s first date with a girl. Oh, you grew up so fast.”

That earns a chuckle. “*Mom!* It’s not like that.”

“Let a mother dream. Besides, I said the same thing when I was your age.”

Her lip quivers slightly, and Will fumbles for a subject change because two emotional episodes in an hour is two too many. Luckily, Jonathan pokes his head in from the hallway.

“Give him a break, mom. I’ll be teasing him all night anyways. I’m doing photography too, so I promise I’ll get you an entire album of embarrassing photos if you stop bugging him.”

Will has never seen his strong-willed mother shut up that fast in his life, and he sends a silent *thank you* - or maybe a silent *screw you* - to Jonathan. His brother sits on Will’s other side on the couch, though it’s a tight fit.

“You’ll be ok though, right? Is this what you really want?”

“It’s not how I imagined Homecoming, but I guess it’s better than it could be.”

His brother seems satisfied with that response, and he heads off to his room to prepare.

Will does the same, and soon his room is even messier as he haphazardly drains his closet dry looking for a nice shirt. A tux is far out of budget - something he feels unreasonably self-conscious about - but he cobbles together a decent outfit consisting of a clean plaid shirt and black slacks that could pass as dress pants from a distance. He lacks dress shoes, so he wears dark sneakers. He finds a few ties,

but realizes they are all hand-me-downs from his father and decides against it.

After combing his hair and gelling it into his patented *Ultra Bowl Cut Deluxe* , he slips out after hugging Joyce goodbye.

Well, it's now or never. No backing out now, Will. It's just a stupid phase. Time to set yourself straight.

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Jen's house is a run-down bungalow much like his own. Actually, it's arguably worse; nobody seems to maintain the walls, and the side of the house is full of dull, chipped paint, and dusty cobwebs that he knows will look great on Halloween. The garden, however, is incredibly well kept, adorned with arrays of flowers of every colour and size: petunias, tulips, roses, and even chrysanthemums (those grow in Hawkins?). From the front steps, he realizes that the flowers are organized in coloured stripes: red roses, orange tulips, yellow chrysanthemums, green orchids, blue hydrangea, and purple lilacs. *The Hayes family must take great pride in their garden.*

She's on the steps, wearing a high-cut, poofy red dress and accompanying crimson heels that would make Dorothy jealous. Her rainbow badge is fastened on her breast, and her blonde hair flows free with only a single butterfly-shaped clip in it. He realizes then that she was *not* kidding about her grandmother being an aesthetic genius.

Normally, she would run over, but she half-limps over to him,

wincing harder with each step. “Ugh, I can *not* do heels at all,” she whines. “Hi, Will. You look handsome as ever.”

She adds a wink, though it turns into another wince when she awkwardly steps on the ground too hard.

“You don’t look too bad yourself,” he teases, “the heels really bring out your true self.”

She laughs. “Oh, fuck off.”

“Maybe change into sneakers? We can match, or something. Unless you think you can keep up on the dance floor,” he says, adding a wink.

Holy shit, am I flirting? Man, I wish Mike was here. I kinda suck at it.

“Oh, thank god you suggested it. I’ll be right back.”

She throws off the heels a bit too violently - if anything, he thinks she might *enjoy* almost decking him in the face with projectile shoes - then rushes indoors. Moments later, his “date” emerges in sneakers, and somehow they go well with the dress. Nice one, grandma.

“ So much better. Let’s get out of here before grandma notices and hounds me to take pictures.”

“Uh, about that...”

Jen turns around, but when she sees nobody at the porch, she gives him an odd look. “What?”

“My brother’s a photographer, and I sorta promised him a lot of pictures.”

Jen grimaces, and Will snorts. “Damn it, Byers. You’d better make this the best night of my life.”

“How about I make it your best in nine lives?”

“Deal.”

= = =

He only thinks about Mike once or twice on the walk there, which has apparently become a distraction. The anxiety about actually dancing with a *girl* fades as he casually chats with said girl about everything from art to movies to hits on the radio. If they weren’t clad in formal wear, he could almost forget the impending dance and relax in the warmth of his friend’s voice.

If anything, his anxiety is replaced with an overwhelming guilt. Since

that dream, hell, from the moment he said yes to her, he's only been concerned about himself. How *he* feels about it, how *he* feels about Mike. But Jen... she likes him. In fact, she really likes him. How that's possible is beyond him. And what if she thinks he likes her back? He's quick to clarify around his mom or El or anyone else, but around her he's just a jumble of awkward words when anyone mentions the word *girlfriend* .

He's leading her on, concealing himself with ambiguity, guarding himself with misdirection. Or, maybe he's guarding Jen instead. If the truth were to protrude out, breaking his barriers and rearing its ugly head, who would hurt more? Him, the sad and pathetic kid who let hero worship and adoration turn into a sinful love, or her, the girl ensnared and used by him?

If I tell her the truth, then what happens? Shit, what even is the truth anyway? I don't know if I'm actually a queer. It could just be misinterpreting friendship. I don't really want to kiss Mike or anything stupid like that. Well, uh... yeah, I don't. But I don't feel that way about El or Lucas or Jen. And it's only been a few days anyway. Could easily be a phase like the preachers say it is. But if it is true, then do I tell her?

He thinks it over carefully. Pros and cons and all that jazz. If he shuts up, then they'll all think he has a girlfriend, and then maybe, just maybe, the bullying will stop. He's not naive enough to believe it, not truly, but anything that could divert Troy is welcome. And if he just tells Jen, the only risk is her disgust, and for no real benefit. Besides, if it does come to light that Jen 'dated' a queer kid, would the mob bully her, call her names and ruin her hair and paint slurs on her locker? The thought of sweet Jen going through that... horrible.

No. He'll weather this on his own. He's handled much worse.

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When they enter the auditorium, Will is greeted with a flash of violet and gold. Rich amber strings of lights decorate the ceiling, bathing the room in their soft glow. The area above the nominal dance floor has flashes of purple and blue light from surrounding coloured lamps. He sees a few couples doing some questionable dance moves, sneaking subtle touches underneath the chaste glances they give the chaperones. The floor is a whirlwind of twirls and not-so-subtle pelvic thrusts, and he can see Jen recoil in embarrassment when she notices it.

There's also a photography station, where he notices Jonathan and one of his coworkers, polaroids in hand, both focused on taking photos of a senior couple who hold each other tenderly. There's an assortment of props by the table: masks and hats and stickers en masse. They've also brought a large selection of backdrops; Will braces himself for the inevitable hour he'll spend standing in front of them.

A girl - seemingly a senior - waves to Jen from a table where some snacks are set up. Jen waves back and strolls over, Will hesitantly following. The girl greets them in a deep, strong voice:

"Jen! You've made it. And you must be Will," she says, not coldly.

He freezes up for a second - *damn anxiety* - before stuttering out a, "yes, that's me."

“Nice to meet you. I’m Molly Turner. Jen’s a friend of mine from the asparagus club.”

“The *what* ?”

Jen laughs cheekily. “Uh, long story, but yeah. Asparagus club. Woo.”

“Sounds a bit like a cult,” he says, unintentionally snorting.

“Caught us red-handed. We go home to home converting people to join our clan. Like Mormons, but vegetarian,” Molly says.

Oh, he *likes* this girl. Her sense of humour reminds him way too much of Robin. “You’ve gotta sign me up. The more blackmail on Jen, the better.”

“Shut up,” Jen says. “And Molly, don’t you say a word or I tell Will that time I caught you making out with-”

“Don’t you dare, Hayes.”

“Good to know we have an agreement.”

From the looks they exchange, Will feels like an intellectual war is unfolding before him, one he may have started. *Will Byers*,

professional catfight-war-thing instigator. Eh, suppose I've been called worse.

Jen turns to him. "Will, mind if I catch up with Molly and the other girls," she gestures to a crowd behind her, "for a bit? We can get some photos and a dance later."

"Uh, sure. I'll go look for Max and Lucas, I guess," Will says, ignoring the subtle feeling of rejection. He has no right to feel that way, he decides.

The next fifteen minutes are spent wandering about the auditorium, trying to detect Max and Lucas among the throng of faces and bodies. He tries to cut through the crowd, but he gets dizzy and disoriented when he's surrounded on all sides. The only odd thing is when he sees a girl in a pink dress and a rather striking blond hairdo (is she Swedish?) wave in his direction, but since he doesn't know her, he brushes it off. Probably just looking for someone behind him.

He's about to give up and pester Jonathan when he notices a flash of black hair pass by him and darts out the auditorium door. Wait. That hairstyle. That shaggy, curly tuft of raven-coloured hair. That looked a lot like *Mike*. But here? Did he get that date he wanted with El? Will's first instinct is to walk in the other direction. The night's been alright so far, so no point ruining it with a confrontation. But if it is Mike, why would he be in such a rush?

He internally curses his curiosity as he exits the auditorium. Will's barely taken five steps when he feels an ominous current in the air, a sensation that prickles the skin on his neck. It's not a physical sensation, but rather a feeling, something foreboding.

Go back , he hears a voice say in the back of his mind.

But still, he presses on, taking silent steps and checking behind him every few seconds. There's not many people save the occasional teen en route to the bathroom. Eventually, he decides to hurry up the pace - not enough to look like he's panicking, but faster than he should be going. Steadily, the din of the auditorium grows dimmer and dimmer, and soon there's only a distant murmur in the background.

He's right next to Mr. Benson's classroom when he hears a whisper.

"Byers."

He straightens at once, heart beating just a tad faster. Maybe he just heard something, maybe-

"Byers. Over here." It's a bit louder.

The voice is still too muffled to recognize, like it's deliberately concealed by clothing. Unfortunately, it also makes it impossible to determine where *here* is supposed to be. He takes a tentative step towards the classroom, before peeking inside. But apparently, that's the wrong choice.

"Dumbass. Behind the lockers," the voice hisses.

Run. Get the hell out, his mind tells him, but Will stands there, paralyzed. If that voice is Mike, then... would Mike hurt him? No, that's ridiculous, even if his family has it's opinions on people like he might be.

So he walks to the lockers, and there, half-cloaked in shadows, is the last person he expected to see.

"Troy?!"

"Shh, not so loud, unless you want the whole fucking school to hear."

"Somehow, I doubt it'll make a difference. Talk. What do you want?"

The bully freezes, then stammers something incoherent for a moment. *This is... weird. What is he doing?*

He feels his voice soften, against his better judgement. "Troy?"

"You know what, forget it." The boy's eyes regain the ground lost during his brief panic. "I'll see you later, f- uh, Byers."

Troy steps away from the lockers and is about to walk away when the sound of footsteps behind him paralyze him. The steps are aggressive and domineering, like a raging bull.

“Troy! There you are. And, what do we have here? Fairy boy! It’s been a while,” Will hears James say, the older bully approaching them.

Fuck. I’m cornered. This was a shit idea.

Will closes his eyes and inhales, brain working overtime to find an exit. He feels his stomach cramp, and the exhale comes out like an exasperated cry. James smirks at that, taking a step towards his friend.

“So the queer scored a hottie for Homecoming, huh. Who’d have thought? Does she know you suck dick behind her back? A pretty pair of boobs ain’t fooling anyone.”

“Sh-shut up,” he says, feeling himself shake.

“Don’t talk to me like that if you know what’s good for you,” James says, voice low and primal.

Run, run, run , the voice in his mind bleats, its tone now dark and ominous. *You weren’t meant to fight, little boy. You’re a pussy. Run; it’s the only thing you’re good for.*

“No, you’re wrong, Dad,” he says, “I’m not a pussy. I can’t run all the time. Leave me alone.”

James turns to Troy. "Uh, is he a retard too?"

Troy shrugs, saying, "Hell if I know. James, maybe we should just go. The slow dances start soon and I promised Cindy one. You know how girls are."

Will pushes the voice aside and tries to think. *Maybe I could get them by surprise and run. What did Jonathan say about it again? Frontal lobe is the weak spot, so a quick blow to the head should do it. Or maybe I should just run, cut my losses, get back to the auditorium somehow. They can't hurt me in front of Mr. Benson.*

James's lips curl into a slasher smile. "Sure, sure. Let me take care of this one. Maybe I'll get his butt buddy after this. That Wheeler kid is here too, saw him earlier. If you hit a fairy hard enough, maybe they spread pixie dust. Hear that, Byers?"

He hears it. And he *snaps* .

"Leave. Mike. Out of this. You sick fuck."

"Then why don't you-"

"And where's *your* boyfriend anyway? Might as well put that tongue of yours to some use."

A few paces away from him, a million emotions flash through Troy's

face in seconds. He sees it all: shock, fear, discomfort, disgust, horror, and then... a smile? It passes by quick enough to be an illusion - yet another trick in his mind's hat - but he's sure he sees a smirk. But then his face settles on an eerie neutral expression, the type of glance that's horrifying because of its *lack* of emotion.

James, on the other hand, wears murder all over his face. And when the bully steps forward, Will's courage breaks, and the adrenaline kicks in. He sprints down the hallway, pushing harder when he hears the aggressive scrape of James's dress shoes against the floor. He's got an advantage now - thank god he wore sneakers - but he's not stupid. It can't last. And there's no way back to the auditorium since he's dashing in the other direction.

He tries to think, but his thoughts are a blur, every sensation shouting different instructions, fear overwriting all vestiges of rationality. Left. Left. Straight. Right, no wait, that's a dead end, left. His auto piloted dash ends with him at the side door of the high school, opening into the basketball court. He doesn't realize he's screwed until he's out the door. There goes any hope of being near people. James has him alone.

His breaths intensify, and soon he's gulping for air he can't have, panic shooting up his sides and spreading through his body. He feels his face heat up, hears his heart pump like a ticking bomb, and looks in terror as James shoots across the court, without a trace of fatigue. There's nothing he can do.

No, there is.

He plants his feet in the ground, halting his momentum, and as James lunges for him, he sidesteps and then tackles the bully as hard as he

can. The impulse causes them both to tumble onto the ground, and Will sees spots for a moment. He's up on his feet in an instant, ready to strike again, when he feels a sudden throbbing in his leg and crumples to the ground.

The next few moments are a blur, but he feels something twist, and then he's screaming louder than any nightmare. His face wettens - with tears or blood, or maybe both - and beneath the sounds of James slurring like a demon from hell are his own sobs. Something sharp slams into his ribs, causing a sharp crunch, and now he's *definitely* bleeding, but it's all too dark to see.

Then, the pain lifts. He hears James struggle, but the boy's weight is gone, and he feels light. He tries to move, but his arms burn. He tries to speak, but his voice is hoarse and there's copper on his tongue. He doesn't bother trying to see.

"Will! Will, hang in there! Stay awake, please!"

There's a female voice crying, and he can feel firm arms wrap around him. And that scent... it's a familiar one, the smell of peppermint and musk, the smell of *home*. No need to fight anymore, then. No need to stay awake. Besides, the pain is too sharp to think. And that's good, because the last thing to think about is what a bloody mess he is and how it's his fault for being like this.

Mike? Is that you? Mike...

"No, it's me Jonathan," the voice says. "And Jen's here too. Mr. Benson came and grabbed us. You're safe now."

Oh. Jonathan, I'm so sorry.

Then, the world goes black.

Notes for the Chapter:

Whelp, that happened. So, lots of stuff going on in this chapter. The scene between Will and Jonathan, for one, is an expansion their actual conversation in 1x02 (one of my favorite scenes in the show). We stan brotherly bonding. Also, we need more Chester in Byler fics because he's amazing <3

We also get to see a bit more of Jen and the first glimpse into her home life. Notice anything odd? Hmm... Oh, and we also meet Molly, who will be important later in the story :) We also have that mysterious Swedish girl that Will totally has never met before. Oh well. And then, there's that ending scene... yeah, it's one of the most pivotal scenes in this tale. But this happened back then, and still does, sadly.

And there's a few other references to things throughout the chapter, some of which will make sense later. Anyhow, I'd love to hear thoughts on the chapter/story overall, positive or negative! Comments are ALWAYS welcome :) There's still plenty of chapters left for me to improve my writing.

Next week: we'll see Homecoming from Mike's POV, and the week after will be from Will's POV and is the finale for Part 1 of the story! Super excited about that one. Till next week; take care!

9. Homecoming - Part II

Summary for the Chapter:

Tonight,
Mike wears a bowtie,
Molly likes feet,
and Jen is really mad.

September 7th, 1985

“Jesus, Wheeler, hurry it up,” Max groans, flopping onto his bed next to El. The two girls share a look while Mike fiddles with his tie, trying to get that full Windsor *just right* but coming up short for the twentieth time and counting.

“You wouldn’t understand,” he says, “girls don’t have to wear these stupid ties. Besides, there’s like two times a year I actually get a chance to look good.”

“You always look good,” El says, and were it not for the slight snark in her voice he might actually believe her. *Stupid Max and her corrupting people.*

“Maybe Mike actually has a secret date, and he’s barbie-dolling himself up for her,” Max snickers before reaching for a comic he’s left lying on the floor. “Come on, it’s just Will.”

Mike sighs. *Just Will* is the problem. If Will is gay, wouldn't that mean he cares about how Mike looks? And if Will isn't gay, everyone else will care about how he looks. No winning here.

"Max, help him," El says, snatching the comic book. It's *X-Men #134*, one of Will's favourites.

Max shrugs and walks to his dresser. She grabs his tie, which is slightly wrinkled from the constant folding and unfolding. She then tosses it to the side and looks at him.

"That colour sucks. Yellow? Really? With a black jacket, Mike? You must have something better."

"I've got a few old bow ties," he says, then flushes a bit, "but that's not, uh, sexy enough."

"Well last I checked, you don't apologize to a boy by seducing him. Hmm. Wait, that's actually not a bad idea. I should try it with Lucas," she says.

"Eww, way too much information."

She punches him lightly on the shoulder. "Your idea. Besides, bow ties can be sexy. Occasionally. Sorta. Just grab it already."

Behind her, El scratches at her hair for the third time in five minutes.

He can sympathize; he once tried the wig on himself, only because he was curious, of course. His hair did not enjoy the pressure, nor the heat. And the constant itchiness was so irritating he removed the blonde mop within minutes.

Mike walks over to his closet when he freezes for a moment. Directly behind where Max is looking is *Under the Rainbow*, which he had awkwardly put away after reading a rather... *interesting* scene between the prince and his knight. He wonders for a moment if he'll be sleeping peacefully. But that's a later issue.

He opens his closet a bit aggressively and fumbles about for a moment until he finds a dusty box with a cobweb on it. Inside are a few bow ties, the last remnants of his embarrassing "I wanna look like Donald Duck" phase as a kid. But what Max doesn't know won't hurt her.

"Max, could you come here? I've got a couple ties," he says. "Not sure which to pick."

She walks over, and El, having stopped scratching her hair like a cat does to its fur, joins. While the girls examine the bow ties, clearly suppressing laughter, he silently shoves the paperback into the nearest drawer. *Well that was close. I really need to be more careful. What if Mom saw that... or Dad?*

"I like this one," El says, holding up a red bow tie. She fiddles with it, putting it against her pink dress for fun. "Mike, can I wear this?"

"Uh, El, girls shouldn't-" He's cut off by a glare from Max that seems

to say *yeah, no, don't*. “I mean, it would look great on you!”

El giggles cutely before undoing the tie and struggling to put it on. He moves to help her, hoping nobody will question why he has too much experience with this. Max watches him intensely before handing him a white tie.

“That’s *much* better,” she says when he finishes. She leans in and straightens his collar, before patting down the front of his jacket. “You look half presentable now.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“So can we *please* just leave now?”

He grimaces. “I still need to fit my boutonniere.”

Max facepalms, and El mimics her before accidentally slapping herself and muttering a quiet *oww*.

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Of course, his mother doesn’t let them go before taking an entire scrapbook’s worth of pictures. He watches as Max slowly starts to lose her patience, frustration slipping out from beneath the weak veneer of politeness. El, on the other hand, has far too much fun for Mike’s patience. It’s probably because she never does this with Hopper. Does the police chief even own a camera? Probably not;

papa bear or not, he's not the type to be caught dead engaging in sentimental crap.

But when Max growls a little too loudly under her breath, Karen luckily takes the hint and sends them off. She shoots Mike a warning glance - *don't break curfew two nights in a row*, or something - and he gives her a dismissive shrug. She hardly gives a shit when Nancy's out late. But Nancy always gets the wrist slaps, while *he's* the one giving toys away for misbehaving once. Someone's the golden girl.

They pick up Lucas and Dustin from the former's place, and soon the boisterous conversation they've always had is back. El flashes him a smile, clearly happy to see the Party (mostly) back together. He tries to return the smile, but the broodiness doesn't leave his eyes. *This isn't the Party. Not without Will. We can't heal without our healer. A Party without a cleric is just bait, and the orcs will kill us all.*

Bustling with energy as they are, neither Lucas nor Dustin deign to mention Will. His name is implied several times, but each instance is instead replaced with a silence. Mike distinctly becomes aware of twigs rustling in the background as his friends struggle to change topics, filling the silence with vapid chatter. And when they approach the area near the forest where he and Will fought, Mike stomps on the twigs just a little bit harder. The cracking sounds aren't soothing.

It's not long before they enter the auditorium and Mike sees flashes of blue and gold. The cool blues and purples give the room a delicate, almost sensual vibe, but the teenagers bumbling around the place clearly aren't aware. He sees bodies crashing on the dance floor in a way that *must* hurt, but when he looks over to Lucas, the boy is watching them raptly like a game of floor hockey. Probably taking notes, knowing him. He can hear a low rumble in the distance, obscured by some Billy Ocean song in the background. And,

unsurprisingly, there's no Will Byers in sight.

His stomach churns slightly; *there's* the doubt. Mike braces himself for the storm of what ifs when a high voice interrupts him:

"Ah, hello, Mike. Hello, everyone."

The Party responds with a chorus of hellos to their English teacher, except El who awkwardly stares at him, transfixed. She has an odd look in her eye, a marriage of doubt and curiosity. He makes a mental note to ask later.

"Mike, I was wondering if I could steal you for a moment," Mr. Benson says.

"Uh. Well, actually I was looking for someone and-"

"Will? He and Jennifer went to the couples booth a few minutes ago. They're likely taking pictures."

Mike's eyebrow twitches slightly. How did he know? Is he that obvious?

"Alright," he says, walking off towards the snacks area before realizing that it's probably a more private matter. So, he changes course and stalks off to a quieter corner, by a bench.

“What did you need me for?” His tone is a bit sharper than intended, but he’s too on edge to care.

Mr. Benson shrugs. “I was wondering how your reading is coming along.”

“You mean the *Iliad* chapters? Fine.”

They both know the man means something else, but he’ll be damned if he’s the one to bring it up. Mr. Benson chuckles for a moment: “Linda mentioned you the other day. Told me a ‘sprightly laddy’ - her words, not mine - came in search of a special little novel.”

“Why didn’t you tell me who the author was?”

Mr. Benson doesn’t answer, instead making a vague hand gesture. *Ok, so he clearly wanted me to meet Linda and ask her. How the hell does he even know her? Some magic homosexual underground network? Next thing he’ll tell me that Will’s their secret ringleader or something. That would be like, the third or fourth most surprising thing in my life.*

Mike leans in slightly before adding in a conspiratorial whisper, “Did Linda know I was coming?”

“No. It was a coincidence.”

Bullshit. “Ah, alright. Well, the book is... I’ve read the first chapter.”

Mike prays that Mr. Benson won’t interpret the slight stammer as a lie. In reality, he read half the book on the first day, the most he’s read at once since elementary school. But no point looking too enthusiastic. He *had* to read it fast. To, uh, finish quickly before someone else saw the book. Yeah, it was for efficiency purposes.

But before Mr. Benson can comment, Mike finds himself adding, “it’s really eye-opening, actually. They’re really good friends.”

“Friends, yes,” his teacher mutters. “Well, I think you’ll find the second last chapter interesting if you get there.”

He then pats Mike on the back and stands up, tilting his head towards the couple booth. Mike gives him a thumbs up and speed-walks over. *Please please please don’t be making out when I get there.*

But when he gets there, Will is nowhere to be found. Jen, however, is there, next to another girl, one with chestnut hair and smooth features. The girl, whom he recognizes as Molly Turner, is wearing a scandalously low-cut yellow dress. It’s quite a statement, he notes, compared to Jen’s modest red dress.

“Heya, Mike,” Molly greets, waving to him as he approaches.

“Hi, Molly,” he all but whispers. Then, a bit louder, “what’s with the dress?”

Molly gives him a hooker's smile - surprisingly appropriate. "Someone has to set trends around here. I swear, girls these days dress like ancient times. Like come on, this ain't Ancient Greece, ankles aren't sexy anymore. Well, unless you're Miss Rutherford. She definitely has a foot fetish."

Jen grimaces. "Ok, first, how the hell do you know each other? Second, that's gross."

Molly lifts up a leg towards Jen, and Mike turns away before he gets an eyeful. "Aww, come on, Hayes. You'll never know till you try. I bet you secretly wanna give my feet a spin." She puts her foot back down, before straightening out her dress. "Oh, Mike and I know each other from drama club. You know how I'm the lead actress? Well, this guy's writing me a song."

"Yeah," he murmurs. "But when you told me to write about your feats, I didn't realize you meant that kind."

She bursts out in hideous laughter, and he sticks his tongue out at her. Jen rubs her temple, before turning to Mike with a fiery glance. The gravity of her glare throws him off-kilter for a moment. It's like taking a walk in a park and hearing a gunshot. So disorienting.

"Molly, we'll catch up later. Mike and I need to talk. *Now.*"

"Jennifer, I need to-"

“Now means now. Before Will comes back.”

“Where’d he go?”

“None of your business. I have a few words for you, and you’re about to hear them. I don’t give a shit if you don’t want to.”

Molly has the nerve to look *amused*. “Oh shit, this looks spicy. I’ll go find Robin. See ya!”

After the other girl leaves, Jennifer gives him a hard glare. But at this point, he’s had enough. *Ok, enough bullshit. I need to talk to Will, not his stupid not-girlfriend. If this keeps dragging out, I’m bound to say something stupid again. It’s the Mike special. And then Will’s lost to me forever.*

He speaks first, voice firm and commanding. “Alright, what do you want? I’m here to talk to Will, not you.”

“That won’t be happening. He’s miserable enough as is. If you talk to him, I’ll be right there the whole time.”

“What are you, his mother? Mind your own business.” He berates himself for going right to rudeness - so much for lessons learned.

"No, I'm someone who cares about his best interests. Unlike you. I *know* what happened between you two."

Mike freezes. Wait, Will *told* her? That doesn't seem right. Will's too closed off to confide like that to a girl he barely knows. Maybe it's a trick. That, or maybe they're close now. Will *has* been distant with the whole Party. The thought stings - so much for years of being best friends if some stupid girl can replace him in a week.

"What exactly did he tell you?"

"Nothing. But as someone who's had a crush on him for years, you notice things. Especially topics that he's a bit sensitive about. Not like that idiot Troy is subtle about it."

That much he can agree with. "To get this straight: you're trying to stop me from talking to Will because of some stupid hunch?"

"Precisely. There's some lines you don't cross, Wheeler, hunch or not."

Mike closes his eyes and inhales, but when he opens them, Jen is still staring him down, expression halfway between murderous and self-aggrandizing. And in that moment, any fragments of patience he was holding onto dissipate into the September air.

"You don't get to decide that. Will is *my* best friend, not yours. You've known him for what, a week? And suddenly you know

everything about him when he hasn't said shit to you? Get that controlling bullshit out of here."

"Some best friend you are. You're the one who fucked up—"

"I *know* I fucked up! And I'm sorry about it. But my apologies are for Will, not you. Screw this, I'm gonna go find him."

He turns to walk away, but a firm hand grips his arm.

"Listen, Mike. I hate you for what you did. I really do. Do you think I want to spend a second longer with you than I have to? Put your ego aside and *listen* to me. I'm doing what's best for Will."

Alright, that's enough, he thinks. *Sorry for this, Will.*

"Did Will tell you about the time I literally saved his life? Did you know that I'm the reason you aren't dating a corpse?" His voice is calm as he says it, low and deep like Hopper interrogating a criminal, and even *he's* intimidated by himself.

Jen's hand drops immediately, and she freezes. Her expression falters, and the rage in her eyes gives away to concern - or is that fear? Wordlessly, she notions to a nearby bench and shuffles to it, Mike walking mirthlessly behind her. The two sit for a moment, locking eyes with anything but each other.

Finally, Jen blurts, “what happened? Will didn’t tell me that.”

“He probably didn’t say anything about his father either, then. Or about how the guy he admired died. Or the truth about his funeral. You don’t know about any of that. Will’s trauma runs far beyond the stupid remark I made. And I know it was stupid. I’m here to set things right, not to hurt him more.”

“...fuck,” is all Jen says. Briefly, he wonders if he went too far. It’s not like he wants to ruin Will’s friendships, set a torch to his new life. *Well, at least I didn’t mention what happened last summer... It. If this much freaks her out, she has a bat’s chance in hell to help Will.*

“Yeah. So tell me: where is he?”

Jen sighs, shaking her head. “He went to find Max and Lucas. He’ll be back in five.”

Mike nods, and he’s about to take a seat when El comes darting towards him, excitement in her eyes. He has to stifle a giggle; something about that pink dress and blonde wig is so damn *strange*, even after all this time. Jen cracks a smile, though it seems half sarcastic.

“Mike! Mike! Come dance,” El says. “I can’t find Max or Lucas. Dustin says they’re ‘going to first base’ somewhere. What’s that?”

“It means someone’s about to get laid,” Jen muses, before waving to

El. "I'm Jen. Nice to meet ya. And nice bow tie, by the way."

"Hi, Jen! What is getting laid?" El tilts her head slightly, a sign that she's about to ask a million more questions. Silently, Mike looks around the room, trying to find an escape route.

"Maybe Mike can explain that," Jen says, a smirk on her face that is eerily reminiscent of Max because *of course* it is.

"Oh, *hell no*. Ask your dad that, El, I'm not the guy to -"

He rushes to cover his mouth when he realizes his mistake, but both girls give him an odd look. Damn. Well, so much for El going undercover.

"You're El? Oh my god, Will won't shut up about you. I swear he secretly likes you or something," Jen says, unmoved by the revelation.

El just laughs. "No, we're friends."

"I see," Jen says. Then, her eyes light up, and her eyebrows curl up in amusement. "Wait, *now* I remember you. Aren't you that Swedish cousin everyone thought Mike was shagging?"

Mike's about to interrupt with a *what the fuck* when El beats him to it.

“Yes!”

Jen gives Mike a bump on the shoulder, the animosity from a minute ago apparently forgotten. “Not that I judge, but really? At least she’s cute.”

“El, we need to have a talk later. And uh, she’s my second cousin, thrice removed. At least she’s not from here. Everyone in Hawkins shares a gene pool, so you and Will are probably more related,” he says, nudging her back. “Also, El, shagging does not mean what you think it does, so *please* don’t tell people that.”

El pouts slightly, barely concealing a giggle. “Okay. Let’s dance! Jen, you can come too.”

“I’m alright. Just gonna wait for Will or Molly. Mike, if you wanna see Will, be back here in five.”

He nods, grabbing El’s hand and striding off towards the dance floor, but not before flipping the bird at Jen with his free hand.

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The two shuffle about, cramped by the crowd and drunk on the music. Mike places a tentative hand on El’s back, slowly guiding her own arm towards his waist. He’s hardly a functional dancer -

something Nancy and Will have given him endless shit for - but luckily, El isn't a professional either. After a bout of awkward sways, the two settle into a steady rhythm, heads pressed close together.

If only he could look El in the eyes.

It's like that perfect night at the Snow Ball - the moment he thought he'd had it all. The Mind Flayer was gone, Will was safe and alive, and he held a beautiful girl in his arms. Back then, he had let his world dissolve into sensation, the relief and joy and comfort mixing together like colours. Yet, his palette was incomplete. There were blues and browns and golds, all mixed to perfection, but the other warm colours weren't there. No, the warmth was missing, and he never let himself see it. But now, his eyes are wide open.

Why the hell am I even doing this? I came to find Will, not to wax nostalgic about my failed relationship.

"Are you sad?" El's voice makes him jolt, pushing away for a moment.

"N-no. I'm fine. Sorry, just thinking. About the Snow Ball." He takes her hand again, a bit forcefully, and readjusts their position, increasing the distance slightly. El's face falls, but her smile doesn't.

"Mike."

"Yeah?"

“It’s ok. I’m ok.”

All he can do is nod, so El continues: “I’m not asking to date again. Mike, you’re sad. Not just because of Will. I can feel it.”

“I - You’re not mad?” He huffs, surprisingly short on breath. “About our relationship? But I hurt you.”

El shakes her head, the strands of her wig flopping around wildly. “I’m happy. Because of you, I have friends now. And I want to be your friend. Boyfriends are annoying.”

Mike smiles at that. “Not as annoying as girlfriends.”

“Let’s be friends. Friends can dance together,” she says, closing the distance again. This time, he doesn’t flinch or zone out.

“Hey, El? You’re amazing. You know that, right?”

“Yes, silly.”

He raises his glance from the floor, looking his ex-girlfriend in the eyes. “Good. Then I’m happy too.”

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It's been ten minutes when he returns to find Jen sprawled on the bench, Will nowhere in sight. Upon seeing him, Jen gives a half smile and shrugs in answer to his tacit question. El seats herself at an empty spot next to Jen.

"Where's Will?" El asks. "Mike wanted to talk to him."

Jen sighs, eyes flickering slightly: "Not sure. He was supposed to be here by now."

A small pit develops in Mike's stomach, and he instinctively tries to push it away. There's no monsters here, no bullies, no bad men. And Will hasn't been *that* depressed lately... right? Shame and anxiety course through him when he realizes that he doesn't know.

"Jennifer? Did anything about Will seem off to you? Like earlier today," he says.

"No. Well... I don't think so? Is something happening to him?"

"Not sure, but I was thinking... This dance, it's a lot like the Snow Ball. M-maybe he had a panic attack. Will's therapist said that repeat events can trigger shit."

Jen's eyes widen at the words *therapist* and *repeat*, but he ignores

that. “You sure he’s not just busy talking to Max or something?”

He pauses at that. *Shit, she’s probably right. I gotta stop assuming the worst with him all the time. Not like that’s easy to do given how much of a hard-on evil monsters seem to have for him. Gah, I’m turning into fucking Joyce.*

But ever since *It* happened last summer, he’s been twice as jumpy. Paranoid, even, much to Will’s intense irritation. They’ve even argued about it a few times, Will repeatedly asserting that he’s not going to self-destruct if he’s a few minutes late for whatever reason. And Mike *wants* to believe him, but a part of him can’t trust Will to do that. *Yet another thing to work on*, he sighs to himself.

“Maybe you’re right. Guess I’m worrying about nothing,” he says, letting out a fake laugh that only seems to unnerve the poor girl more. “Max never does shut up once she gets started.”

“Coming from Mr. Ten Hour Campaign himself,” he hears a voice snort behind him, and he turns to see Max and Lucas, but no Will.

“Shit. Have you guys seen Will anywhere?” His voice rises half an octave, enough for the two to give him odd looks.

“Nah, we were busy,” Lucas says. Nobody bothers to comment on the blush on his cheek, or how both his and Max’s clothes are wrinkled.

“Ok, that’s it. I’m gonna go find-”

“MIKE! LUCAS!”

Mike turns around to be greeted by an out-of-breath Dustin, pointing his finger behind him.

“Dustin?”

“Hurry, come quick. It’s Will.”

Jen’s on her feet in a flash. “What happened? Is he ok? Dustin, what the hell happened?”

Dustin shakes his head, eyes slightly red. “He... fuck. James beat the fuck out of him in the court, and he’s barely conscious. Looks pretty bad. Jonathan sent me to find you guys. Mr. Benson just called an ambulance. Fuck, why Will?”

For a moment, nobody dares breathe. Then, chaos erupts, with Jen and El and Dustin dashing off, all in various states of disarray. Lucas mutters something inaudible to Max and then rushes off in the opposite direction.

Max stays where she is, giving Mike a cold look. “Please tell me you got a chance to talk to him.”

Mike can't do anything but shake his head and lower it in shame.

"God damnit, Wheeler. What did I fucking tell you? Hope you're happy with yourself, cuz you played a part in this. I can't believe it happened again."

She stomps off, her heels grating against the wooden floor, her words reverberating endlessly in his ears. Mike just sits there, despondent and alone.

Will's been captured by monsters before, stolen in the moments where his watchful eye glanced elsewhere. It's Will who has suffered in silence while his demons consume him from inside, Mike unable to do anything but watch and hold his hand. But now, it's *Mike's* fault, not some paranormal monster or some mental illness.

"Say, Mike, why do you wanna be a paladin?"

Will had asked him that once, on a quiet night that he thought he had long forgotten. The two had stayed over after a campaign, whispering to each other in the darkness of Mike's basement. Will wasn't afraid of the dark back then. Why would he need to be?

"I dunno. Guess I just wanna be the hero. Protect you guys, ya know? Uphold justice and righteousness, like all the stuff the manual says."

He had been stupid enough to believe he could do it. And god, he had tried. Failed miserably, sure, but nobody could tell him he hadn't

tried.

“Mmmh. You’re good at that.”

The words sound almost mocking now. Will was completely wrong. Mike hadn’t just failed to protect him, but he *caused* Will to get hurt. He hurt the healer, and now the whole Party is fragmenting, falling apart like unstitched patchwork on a windy day.

This can’t continue. It’s too late for apologies now. Sure, he could go and beg Will to forgive him - and the boy would probably still do it. But then what? Keep screwing over Will again and again? Even if Will isn’t gay, Mike probably still can’t keep him safe. It’s not like he can even save *himself* right now. All he can do is beat the shit out of James the next time he sees him, but it’s not like that changes anything.

No. There’s only one option. Every other road leads to ruin. He needs to say goodbye. Cut things off with Will forever. For both his sake and Will’s sake. And so he does.

Goodbye, Will. You’re my best friend. I’ll miss you.

Notes for the Chapter:

So uh... sorry this update took literally forever :(I knew life would keep me from being able to regularly update this at some point. But no worries,

I'm still working away at it, even if things take longer to write. It's just kinda difficult to do when I have little free time + essays (side note: going from academic writing to creative writing and then back is really jarring and it sucks).

But anyways, about today's chapter: here's Mike's POV of Homecoming! As expected, things between him and Jen are... not quite there. They're honestly both being a little paternalistic (as everyone else seems to be around Will), but they both mean well.

And then of course, we have Mike and El. One of the big challenges for the fic was how to portray their relationship, because while I personally see them staying as good friends, there's always that slight awkwardness post break-up to deal with. But that's more or less resolved now, and we can get wholesome platonic moments with the two :)

Next chapter is the finale to Part 1 of the story! We'll see the fallout and results of the bashing from Will's perspective, and of course set up the plot and characters for Part II. Some interesting surprises around the corner in that one, so stay tuned! I can't promise weekly updates these days, but I'll try to get it out when I can. Hopefully I don't have to rewrite a bunch of stuff like I did with this chapter.

As always, feel free to let me know what you think. All comments are appreciated <3 Till next time!
-Dan

10. Renewal

Summary for the Chapter:

Tonight,
Jonathan is brother-of-the-year,
secrets are spilled,
and Will moves forward

September 8th, 1985

The next day is nothing but a series of images, faces popping in and out as the world brightens and dims endlessly. It's not a new feeling, fading in and out of consciousness like this. He's felt it before when the Mind Flayer had him. Every time he reaches for the outside world before him, some reflex jerks him back to sleep, caging him in the darkness. Once, he awakens to a sharp pulse of pain in his ribs, but he's too tired to scream. Another time, there's a numbness in his leg, and his entire body feels like lead, sinking into whatever bed he's on.

When he gets up for real and sees a dull blue hospital room, it feels like another nightmare. After all, hospitals mean that something is broken, be it an arm, a rib, or his spirit. Hospitals are for stupid, expensive medications and useless therapy sessions and staring at the ceiling for hours. They remind him of shadowy horrors and charred skin. But when he touches his chest and feels the familiar itch of the burnt patches, he resigns himself to being awake for real.

Slowly, the pieces start to coalesce, and he attaches names to the faces he saw. His mom. Jonathan. Jen. Max. Lucas. Dustin. Chief Hopper. The Swedish girl. But no Mike. A part of him hopes that he just missed Mike, that his best friend was by his side the whole time,

but the truth lingers in his mind. Mike doesn't care anymore. It's really over.

He tries to look for a window, but there's nothing except dull blue everywhere. No way to figure out how long he's been out. He hopes it's not too long - hospital bills get really expensive, really quickly, and his mom and Jonathan have no free time for extra shifts as is. They'll probably tell him they can afford it, giving him those *don't worry about it* looks like they always do, while secretly freaking out about it. It's not his first rodeo with the fake cheeriness act. He's not a child.

Will spots Jonathan in the corner, staring lethargically at the wall. He decides to get up and walk over, but as he tries to sit up, his arm flares up in pain, eliciting a scream. Suddenly alert, his brother is at his side in an instant.

"Hey there, take it easy, you shouldn't be moving yet. Glad you're up though; mom was getting worried there."

"What else is new?" He doesn't conceal the bitterness in his voice.

"Not much, I guess," Jonathan says, running a hand through his unbrushed hair - he's been here for at least a night. "So... do you remember what happened?"

"James happened. He nearly beat me to death on the basketball court. Uh, I think Jen was there. And you too."

Jonathan exhales in relief, which Will guesses means he's not an amnesiac now. "Yeah. Your English teacher - Mr. Benson, I think - came and told me what happened. No idea how he found out so quickly, though. Or how he knew me."

"Must be a secret gay sensor or something," Will mutters.

"Figured. James call you a queer again?"

Will goes quiet. It only then sinks in what actually happened. For one, he just put a target on his back for life. Mike's back too, probably. He also may or may not have hallucinated and heard his goddamned father. And to top it all off, he's never going to be rid of the *Fairy Boy* moniker. As if the gay jokes weren't bad enough as is.

"Kinda. He did, but..."

Jonathan gives him a supportive look, but doesn't cut him off.

"I lost my shit at him when he insulted Mike. So I called James gay too, which set him off."

Several emotions flash through Jonathan's face. First, Will sees the disappointment in his brother's eyes when he mentions Mike. Second, he sees utter bewilderment, a *why the hell would you do that* look. But then, Jonathan's lips curl into a smirk. *Apparently your little brother finally growing a pair and getting sent to the hospital is worth celebrating*, Will finds himself thinking.

“Whoa. Wait till Mom hears *that* one.”

“Yeah, I’m so getting grounded. Worth it.”

“You called him a limp wrist and he gave you a limp wrist. Seems like a fair deal to me.”

The two exchange a chuckle at that, and Will lets himself ease into the hospital bed. Jonathan really *does* make everything better. He closes his eyes, letting Jonathan inform him of all the minutiae in their life. Apparently, Will getting beat up was such a dramatic event that the sink decided to stop working. The toaster took a day off too. Jonathan tells him how everyone has popped in and out over the day he’s been unconscious. Everyone in the Party (sans Mike), Jen, Chief Hopper, Mr. Benson, Nancy, Molly, and apparently even Robin and Steve Harington.

“Want me to call Mom?” Jonathan asks. “She went home to get clothes and shower, but she’ll be back soon. Had to kick her out since she was falling asleep every few minutes.”

Will shakes his head. “No, I need to talk to you first. Can we- can *you* afford this? All these bills, on top of the meds-”

“Enough of that. Yes, it’s expensive. I’ll need to work another shift for a bit. For now, we’re loaning from Hopper, and he’s not too worried about us paying back yet.”

“We’re in debt again?” Will feels his voice crack.

The last time they were in serious debt was back when Lonnie lived with them. All that alcohol, and whatever other frivolous purchases Lonnie would make... they added up. More than once, the water would run out, or there would be no heat because of bills neglected or unpaid. His mother had laboured for *years* to convince Indiana’s power companies that they weren’t belligerent, neglectful people, just destitute as hell. But this time, there’s no deadbeat dad to blame for that.

“Will, it’s ok, really.”

“No, it’s not. You’re tired enough as is. I’m so damn useless. I’m sorry, Jonathan.”

As if to torment him further, his eyes decide to leak. It starts as a quiet whimper, but when Jonathan pats him on the back, he’s ceaselessly bawling. Will tries to keep his eyes sealed shut, because he can’t look up and see the pity that must be in Jonathan’s eyes. He just can’t. It’s bad enough to see his mother’s disappointment, or Mike’s. But his brother? It’s too much.

So he keeps his head down and cries while Jonathan pulls him into a hug and traces steady circles on his back. A few minutes later, he’s still tucked into Jonathan’s shirt, but he looks marginally less pitiful once the tears dry.

“Remember when Lonnie asked me to kill that bunny for my 10th birthday?” Jonathan’s voice is soft, yet remorseful.

Will nods, still allergic to eye contact.

“I thought the same things when I couldn’t do it. Sad, pathetic, useless, a burden, all the same crap you’re feeling. I still feel that way at times. Like if I had just manned up and shot the thing, maybe Lonnie wouldn’t think I was a failure. Maybe he’d have stayed. Maybe he’d have turned me into a real man, instead of the weird freak I am.

“It took me a while to realize what a dumbass I was being. I’ve always hated Lonnie, but I never really knew what it was like to be a real man. If killing rabbits doesn’t make you a real man, what does? Guess when I figured it out.”

Will moves himself from his brother’s chest, trying not to fixate on the wet spot on his shirt. *A real man? Hopper? No, he’d probably kill a rabbit if El asked him to. Mr. Benson? Yeah, no... oh. Oh.*

He whispers the answer: “Bob?”

“Yeah.”

The name generates an uneasy silence, the memories dangling between their breaths.

“Bob taught me more about being a man in a day than Lonnie did in fifteen years. He loved us, Will. We weren’t his family by blood, but he still loved us. And he wasn’t afraid to be himself. I think that’s why Mom loved him so much...”

Will looks up at Jonathan, but he doesn’t see any pity in his eyes. No, his brother’s eyes are shimmering, like a reflection of his own.

“I think you’re old enough to hear this. After the Mind Flayer incident, I talked to Mom about Bob. About what happened to him. I was so busy driving that I didn’t see his last moments. Took her a while, but she finally told me what happened. Mom said,” Jonathan pauses for a moment to take a deep breath, “Bob was really scared in those last moments. Terrified, even. But he just kept on going. He put us first.”

“Just like always, Mr. Baldo came to me. But this time, I didn’t run. This time, I stood my ground.”

“Will, that’s what a real man is. A real man puts his loved ones first, even when he’s really scared. And he’s not afraid to be himself, no matter what happens to him. So no matter how many times something like this happens, regardless of expenses, I’m *always* gonna be there. Just like Bob was.”

Will flicks a teardrop away. “Yeah. Just like Bob was.”

“You aren’t useless. Not to me, not to Mom. And who cares what

other people think? James doesn't know shit. Be a freak. It's who you are."

This time, Will is the one who reaches out to hug his brother. "Thanks, Jonathan. I love you."

"Love you too, dork."

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They spend the next hour with idle banter, Jonathan rambling on about work and life while Will listens, nodding every now and then when his brother pauses. Joyce doesn't appear, and Will figures that she must have fallen asleep at home. A doctor flitters in and out after Jonathan alerts the staff of Will being awake. She's a small, stout lady with bright eyes that obscure a tired smile.

Apparently, his right arm is broken, along with a few cracked ribs, though there's no permanent organ damage. The doctor tells him to rest for six weeks and prescribes a few cheap pills - well, cheap for a family that isn't dirt poor. The only upside to the constant pain in his side is that it distracts him from the "you got off lucky, young man" spiele. Doctors seem to love that one, as though being crippled for a month isn't going to screw up his school life completely. And no running from bullies with cracked ribs.

Shit, I'm gonna have to stay after school for a while. Can't draw or do my art portfolio with a broken arm. Oh god, I can't draw.

He's broken his arm before, once when he was a foolhardy preschooler trying to climb a tree to outdo Mike. Or, more accurately, to impress Mike. Neither of them were athletes, but they had figured that tree climbing couldn't be *that* bad. Teenagers did it in the movies all the time. So they had wandered into the nearby wood - near the place he had confronted Mike years later - and hurled themselves at the first tree they saw.

Mike had propped himself up onto a branch, giving Will the signature smile he had back then - half dopey, half smug. He waved to his best friend, and Will rushed up to reach him. But then, he had pressed too hard on an intermediate branch, and the next thing either boy heard was a horrifying crack.

He hadn't cried much, Lonnie saw to that, but he did mope. A lot. He couldn't do anything but sit at home, longingly glancing at his sketchbook while the other boys romped about in the summer sun. Joyce had revoked his outdoor privileges for a bit, insisting that he not aggravate the injury, but Will knew even back then that she just wanted to keep tabs on him.

Mike had kept him company though, likely out of guilt given the profuse and persistent apologizing he'd do. Leave it to Mike to apologize for something that wasn't his fault, but clam up when he actually *did* mess up. The apologies were always genuine, though. Somehow, he'd burdened Mike back then too.

I wonder if Mike still remembers that day. Probably doesn't. Or maybe he's like me. Maybe he's trying, but can't forget it.

"You're thinking about Mike again, aren't you?" Jonathan gives him a knowing look.

“It’s that obvious?”

Jonathan nods. “I can ask Nancy to bring him. Just say the word. I don’t approve of what he did, but it doesn’t look like you’ll have any peace till you talk.”

Will scratches his head, looking like he’s thinking about the obvious decision. “No thanks. If he wanted to come, he’d have done it already. Don’t think he cares.”

“I wouldn’t say that. Maybe he’s guilty.”

“He’d better be,” he mutters.

“Or maybe... Will, do you think he told them? Troy and James? About what happened between you two? It’s not like Mike to do that, but still.”

His mind immediately rejects the thought - Mike ratting him out to bullies seems as absurd as hospital biscuits ever tasting good. But then again, he likely blabbed to Lucas. But maybe he didn’t. Will opts for a topic change, deflecting from the unease he’s feeling.

“Nah. Uh, say, did you ever get any good photos at Homecoming?”

Jonathan frowns, getting the message. He starts talking about the misadventures of several couples he'd tried to photograph - apparently they wanted some *really* raunchy positions - and Will relaxes, closing his eyes and letting his brother's voice wash over his worries.

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He wakes up to an aggressive knock, or more a thump, on the door. It's loud and impatient, not ideal for his groggy head. Will glances over to Jonathan, who's already moving towards the door. He tries to angle his head to see the visitor, but Jonathan slams the door before he can reposition. His brother huffs and moves back to the bed.

Seconds later, the thumping resumes.

"Who is it?"

"You don't wanna know."

The door knob opens, and Will spots a flash of black hair. *Mike?* Then Troy walks in, and Will freezes. *Just my fucking luck.*

The bully gulps, then gives him a hard look. "Hey, Byers. I, uh, *we* need to talk."

No. Oh dear goodness no. Not the same bullshit as Homecoming

night. He's not falling for it twice.

But Jonathan's one step ahead of him. He places himself between the two, leaning forward in a defensive stance. "Troy, you have exactly ten seconds to get the hell away from my brother before I call the cops."

"Oh, c'mon. I'm not gonna hurt him, promise. Just let me talk to Byers for a few minutes." Troy raises his arms in surrender, before stuffing them in his shorts pockets and pulling them out again empty-handed.

Will eases slightly. *No weapons at least. Though even Troy's not stupid enough to bring them to a hospital. His fists already hurt like hell.*

"No way. Get out," Will says. "Nothing you say is gonna change my mind."

Troy only responds by shutting the door, much gentler this time. "Will. *Please.*"

Will? Not Byers? That's a first. Will's eyes meet Jonathan's, but his brother doesn't flinch or hesitate.

"Screw off before I make you," Jonathan says, tone low and animalistic and *way* too similar to Chief Hopper when he's mad.

“All I wanna say is sorry. That’s what I was gonna say last night before James interrupted. Hell, I’ll say it from here if ya want. Come on, man.”

Ah, the “I’m sorry” trick. He’s pulled that one before, in fifth grade. Will remembers being stupid enough to fall for it, accepting the ‘handshake’ the bully had offered before his arm got painfully twisted. Apparently, handshakes were queer too, according to Troy. Nixon and Presley must’ve been real flaming homosexuals, or something.

Troy’s hands move to the top of his head, and it’s only then that Will notices the cut on his left cheek. It looks relatively fresh, like he just got out of a brawl. If this is another ruse, it’s a damn strange one, way unlike what he deemed the idiot was capable of. He sighs. Something about what Troy’s saying seems inevitable. If not now, he’ll get cornered later at school, without Jonathan and with a broken arm.

“Alright. Fine. But stay where you are. And Jonathan’s listening.”

Annoyance flickers across Troy’s face - as if *he’s* the one wronged by Will’s demands. Self-righteous asshole. Jonathan’s expression is a mixture of irritation and disbelief, but he doesn’t chastise Will. Yet.

But then Troy’s face softens. “I mean it, Will. It’s not that half-ass bullshit from fifth grade. I really am sorry this time.”

Will doesn’t react. Troy continues, after a tense pause: “I’m not gonna bully you anymore. What James did yesterday, that wasn’t cool.”

“And yet you were a part of it,” Jonathan says.

“Wasn’t, I swear. Byers, you can tell him. I didn’t run after you or anything.”

“I guess you didn’t,” Will admits, “but no way that was a coincidence. I’m not stupid. James shows up right as you want to talk to me? What, is he behind the door now too?”

“Fuckin’ hope not. I cut all ties with him. We aren’t friends anymore.”

Will looks right at the bully, and for a brief second, they make eye contact. *Oh shit, he’s telling the truth. He means it.*

“How believable,” Jonathan mumbles. “You’ve teamed up to terrorize Will for what, nearly ten years now? Twisting his arm, spray-painting his locker, teasing him mercilessly. Nancy told me you mocked him at his own *funeral*. So now you strut up here and apologize as if that means shit?”

Troy huffs. Will shoots his brother a look, then glances at Troy: “That cut on your cheek, did James give you that?”

“Yep. Fucking called me a queer too, when I told him I was done. Nothing compared to what he did to you, but we’re through. Scout’s honour, I swear to god, all that shit.”

“Ok. I believe you.”

“Will, *what* are you saying?” Jonathan says. “He could get that cut anywhere. He’s lying.”

No, he’s not. There was something in that look he gave me. Something you wouldn’t understand, Jonathan. Something intentional, something he’s trying to tell me. But what? Shit, I need to talk to him alone, don’t I?

“Trust me, Jonathan. I think he’s telling the truth this time. But there’s something I don’t get, Troy. Why now? Not like this time is much worse than the million other times you or James beat me up. It’s just strange.”

“Yeah, well... I, uh. I can’t. Can’t tell you. Uh. Not with him around.”

Jonathan snorts. “So it’s bullshit then. I’m not leaving.”

Will then pipes up, “Jonathan, it’s fine. I think you can leave us alone for a few minutes. Go eat something.”

Jonathan is as still as a statue. “Will, don’t trust him. He’s done nothing but hurt you.”

“Go. I’m not that fragile; I can take care of myself. I wanna hear him

out. Don't eavesdrop on us either," he adds, without knowing why - gut instinct, probably.

"You'll get beaten up in a hospital," his brother pleads.

"I don't think it can get much worse."

As if to demonstrate, Will jerks his arm, grimacing when the pain flares through him again, followed by a persistent numbness. Troy has the decency to look guilty at the sight.

"Fuck, I- it's that bad? Will, I'm so sorry, really," Troy says, voice cracking slightly before fading into a whimper. It's a bit cathartic, to see the bully look so damn pathetic. God, if only Mike was here to see it.

Jonathan shakes his head, the paternal disappointment evident. "Alright, alright. But if he does anything even *slightly* funny, holler and I'll be here. And Troy, don't you dare lay a hand on my brother if you know what's good for you."

He walks over to the door backwards, gaze focused sharply on Troy. He gives Will one last look before leaving, the door half open. Troy waits a moment, then gently closes it. The bully moves a bit closer to Will, before seating himself on the nearby chair by the hospital bed.

Both boys sit in silence, neither ready to make the first move. Eventually, Troy speaks up, voice half recomposed: "Your arm gonna

be ok? Any cool scars?"

Will tries to shrug, but his arm doesn't take it well. "I dunno. But I'm not gonna forgive you, if that's what you're here for. Never. No matter what you tell me."

"That's fine," Troy says, but Will catches the lie before it leaves his mouth. But he doesn't give a shit. Troy can't just bully him for years and expect that a bit of remorse gets him off the hook.

"Tell me why you changed your mind." He tries to be kind, but instead it comes out bitter, like he's still calling a bluff.

Troy sits quietly, fidgeting with his fingers. The boy's breaths are shallow and heavy now, not unlike Will before a panic attack. His eyes are muted, a lifeless brown. Will pushes himself into a seated position, gazing intensely at his (former?) bully. And for a fleeting moment, gone before he can appreciate it, he feels *bad* seeing the boy in front of him, more vulnerable than even Mike has been.

"I've got a secret," Troy says. "Byers, my parents - they can't... Fuck. Uh."

Wait. No way. He doesn't mean-

"He told me that if I touch you, he'll tell them. I can't let them know. They'll kill me, Will. Or electrocute me or whatever else they're gonna..."

Holy fuck.

Will doesn't let the silence sink in. "Troy, this secret. Is it?"

Troy's half hysterical now, biting his lip so sharply it starts to bleed. Ok. Will can at least throw him a small bone.

"Are you g-" his voice clams up, shit, he can't bring himself to say it either. It's Troy talking, so why does *he* feel so exposed? As if he's gonna be the one to blurt it. It's just a fucking word. Why the hell is it so hard to say?

At last, he settles on, "Troy. Are you like, um, what they say I am?"

Between quiet sobs, the bully gives him a sullen nod. And then, it's all hell from there. All rational thought escapes him as his mind is flooded with empathy and shock and horror and so much damn rage.

"YOU ASSHOLE!" He screams it so loud that the bed shakes slightly and he can hear footsteps by the door - likely Jonathan on standby. He lets the sound reverberate, drinking in Troy's panic, but he's tight-lipped until Jonathan moves away again.

"Byers, not so loud."

“Shut the hell up,” Will says, but lowers his voice a bit anyway with his last fragments of empathy. “So this entire time, you’ve been the queer, and yet you hit me. You terrified me. You slurred at me and my friends. You made me scared to go to sleep at night. Did you know I used to check my closet door every night because I was scared you’d be hiding in there, ready to kill me in my sleep? Of course you didn’t, you selfish piece of human garbage.”

“I know. I’m sorry for that.”

“Troy, you made me want to *die*. I nearly did. If it wasn’t for Mike, I... fuck you.”

“Holy shit. I made you that crazy? I didn’t know. If I had known-”

“Then what? Not like there’s any compassion in that stupid head of yours. Tell me why you did it. All of it. I want an answer *now*.”

For a moment, he realizes that he’s being just as hot-headed as the first day of school, but he shuts his brain back off. Now’s the time for anger, not rationality.

“You wouldn’t be satisfied by any answer I could give.”

“I want one anyways.” His voice is a low growl, like what he’d imagine the Joker having.

“I didn’t want my parents to know. They hate the queers.”

“So do Mike’s parents, but you don’t see him trying to drown people in the Quarry.”

“But Mike’s not actually a fag.”

Well. That stings, for some strange reason. He should be happy about that - and yet it’s also a rejection. A bitter slap in the face. Probably the first of many. Somewhere in the back of his mind lies the fact that he *loves* Mike, but that mixes terribly with anger.

“If you knew that, why’d you hit him too?”

Troy sighs, face pale, as if admitting a hard truth to himself. “Okay, fine. I thought you were actually queer. I thought that if I hit you hard enough, I could beat the queer out of you. That it could go away. You were one of those sensitive kids. And I saw how you looked at Mike and thought, well. And... and I’ll admit it. It felt good to hit you. Like I had power. It made me feel good about myself.”

“That’s not fucked up in the slightest.”

“Deck me back.”

“What?”

“Hit me. In the face. As hard as you can. It ain’t ten years of bullying, but I’ll let you have one.” Troy moves right up to Will. “Bury this fucking hatchet so I can get you out of my head.”

Will looks at the other boy. Then, before he’s even aware of it, his left arm connects with Troy’s face, knocking him onto the floor. Troy clutches his bleeding right cheek.

“Damn. Got matching wounds on each cheek now. You pack a mean punch.”

“Thanks.”

Will lies down again. But Troy doesn’t leave. The other boy just sits on the floor, silently bleeding. He removes his sweater and presses it against his cheek, grimacing when the soft white colour stains red.

“I get why you did it,” Will says. “If you tell your parents you hate the queers, they won’t think you’re one. Survival instincts, right?”

“Yeah.”

Will then realizes he still has a million questions. He takes a deep breath, like those therapists told him to. They were complete hacks, sure, but it’s always made him feel a bit calmer. Especially when Mike breathes with him. In. Out. In. Out. *Calm down, Byers.*

“So James found out about you? Threatened to tell your parents? I guess that’s why you came to me yesterday then.”

“No, it wasn’t James. It was *him*. *He’s* the one who threatened to tell my parents.”

“Who’s this guy?”

“Fuckin’ Benson. Came to me at the start of the year, the first day of school. Ya know, after that thing about AIDS. He told me not to lay a hand on you.”

Will perks up at that. Mr. Benson, of all people? Really? He can’t believe that. Well, ok, maybe he can, the guy is shifty as hell. Plus, Troy hasn’t touched him ever since. Or even called him any names. It’s always been James who did it.

Yet... No. This doesn’t add up.

“Yeah, right. How exactly did he figure you were queer? Magic homo sensor or something?”

Troy’s face goes bright red. “Can’t tell. That’s confidential.”

“Tell me or I won’t believe you.”

“Mmh. Fine. While I was in Phys Ed, he sorta went through my backpack. Found my uh... my porn mags.”

Of course. Classic Troy.

He's not even going to bother ask why Troy had gay porn in his backpack - he knows from Dustin that horny and stupid don't mix well. Still, he can't help but giggle at the admission.

“Byers! Not funny. Plus, I had titty art on the front. Didn't think he'd like, look inside and shit. Thought the homos hate tits. Apparently he did the same thing when he was a kid. Put the saucy stuff inside to keep it safe.”

Will just laughs harder at the mental image of Mr. Benson staring at tits, all grossed out, as though they were alien dung.

“Byers. Hey.” Troy fixes him with a serious look. “Listen. Please don't tell anyone. I'm begging you.”

“Alright. Fine. I won't say anything.”

“Thanks, man. I'll leave you alone now. Won't bug ya again.”

“Troy, you're right about one thing.”

Wait, no, what am I saying? Shit, to Troy? Now? I'm doing it?

“What’s that?”

Last chance, Byers. If you say it, no going back. It’s all in. If I say it now, it becomes real.

“Tits are gross.”

“The fuck does that- oh. Oh. OH. You mean you’re...?”

“Yeah.”

“Damn. Do I get to scream at you now?”

“No. But I’m guessing you at least suspected it. That’s why you told me. Isn’t it?”

Troy nods, standing up again. “Anyone else know about this? Wheeler?”

“Just you.”

Troy fumbles about his stained jacket and pulls out a cigarette. But before he can light it, Will coughs and points to the no-smoke sign. The fucked up part of him notes that there's too many fags in the room as is. Scowling, the bully puts it away.

"Why tell me this?"

Will ponders that one. And then it sinks in what just happened. *I just told someone I'm gay. And I'm still alive. Suck it, Mike.*

"You know about MAD? Like from the war with the commies?"

"Nah, I just know that we're not shooting enough shit and Reagan's mad about that."

"Means Mutually Assured Destruction. Like you nuke me, and I nuke you twice as hard. Got it?"

The panic on Troy's mug is enough of a yes. Then he says, "Ya know, coming here to tell you this was my decision. Not Benson's. I just felt bad. Same with confronting James. After Benson came after my ass, I sorta woke up. Guess he nuked me. I dunno, I sorta realized how you must've felt. What's the word for that again?"

"Not being a jackass?"

Troy flips him off. “No, no, the word Benson taught us. In class.”

“Empathy?”

“Yeah, that. Empathy. I felt empathetic. Or just pathetic, I dunno.”

“It’s torture. Can’t tell anyone,” Will says. “I guess you can relate. Look, Troy, I get that it’s been hard. And I want to forgive you. But I’m sorry; I just can’t. You’ve tormented me for years, and I can’t just forget about all of it.”

“Yeah, yeah, don’t worry. I’ll leave. Did what I came here to do.”

“No, wait, I’m not done. Maybe us being friends isn’t a good idea. But if you wanna, ya know, hang out sometime...”

“Huh? Why the fuck would we do that?”

“Well, you’re the only gay person I know. Besides Mr. Benson.”

Troy’s face lights up in understanding. “But you don’t trust Mr. Benson as far as you could chuck him.”

The memory of that first dream comes flashing back. *You can’t run from the truth.* Maybe it’s time to do something about that.

“Yeah. Again, I don’t wanna be friends. But I do need somebody who understands *this*, because I sure as hell don’t.” *And Mike certainly doesn’t.*

“Like I do,” Troy huffs. “Worth a shot, I guess.”

“After I get out of here, go to the woods behind my place on Saturday night.”

Will hesitates for a second - Saturday night is the Party’s weekly D&D night - but then he brushes the thought away. As if that’ll ever happen again. How naive.

Troy gives a disbelieving, cold laugh. “Fine. Just don’t say shit about this to *anyone*. That includes your asshole brother. And don’t be a bitch when I try to smoke.”

“Alright. Deal.”

This time, when Troy offers his hand, there’s no malice behind it. And so they shake. Because handshakes are gay, and so are they.

= = =

The second Troy leaves, Jonathan (and now his mother) storm in, a

flurry of questions at the ready. *What happened to Troy's face? What were you talking about? Honey, are you ok?* So on, so forth. He knows his answers are half-assed - a combination of nods, shrugs and one-word responses - but his mind is on overload.

He came out to someone. He came out to fucking *Troy* of all people.

Someone knows his secret.

He regrets it immediately - what was he thinking? It had felt so natural, yet so terrifying and raw. Maybe he *does* have balls, between this and lashing out at James.

Now what? He can't be friends with Troy. It just won't work. They're too different, have too much history. Ironically, it's also his safest option, the only person he could talk to without huge risk. Though it's not like any part of being a gay boy in an AIDS-infested America is risk-free.

But he's told someone. He's *actually* gay now, or at least it feels that way. When the secret was just his own, it felt less tangible, less *real*. As if he was tricking himself, or faking it in a weird way. Now, it's out there, beyond his bubble. And if he's not careful, it could ruin him.

Perhaps on some distant day, years from now, he'll look back and laugh. Maybe he'll even accept himself, stop the vortex of self-hatred before it consumes him again. On the other hand, he might die alone in a hospital bed or on the street, kicking and screaming as AIDS takes him. And god forbid someone in Hawkins figures him out for

real.

It's time to move on, struggle forward into his future.

Mike, I'm finally doing what you wanted me to. Sorry it came to this. But I'm gonna make something of myself. I'm gonna try to be happy. With or without you.

He needed a nudge, but he's finally stepped onto the path of the rainbow. And maybe it's parasitic and venomous. But regardless, he's going to start walking.

When Will falls asleep, there's a smile on his face.

END OF PART ONE

Notes for the Chapter:

Oh man, that was fun to write. Lots of dialogue in this one! So yeah, that marks Part I of the story. Between Parts I and II, there's going to be a small time skip, so keep an eye on the calendar. In Part II, we'll see Will and Mike do their own thing for the first half, and then their relationship comes back into focus in the next half. We also get to see more of the supporting cast, which is nice.

A few notes on Troy: so I'm going for a slightly different version of the closeted bully trope. I know it's an overdone trope, but I personally just interpreted him queerly? The thing is, he's also got a bit of a pain-loving, sadistic side to him; I don't really

think him being gay changes that. But at the same time, he does have some basic human empathy. Guess we'll have to see which side wins ••.

Will finally comes out to someone! The first of many coming out scenes in this fic. It's a really awkward and dynamic process, so there's a lot of room for him to grow up. And this is a coming-of-age story, just as much as it is a sexuality story, so there's a lot of growing up he needs to do. Same with Mike. Honestly, writing Will's emotions at the end was my favorite part because coming out is not as simple as it seems on paper.

Aaaaaand I had to rewatch Bob's death scene to write this chapter :(That wasn't fun.

As always, feel free to let me know thoughts, suggestions, critiques! It's always a joy to read any comments. See ya next time for Chapter 11: Cigarette Smoke

-Dan